



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

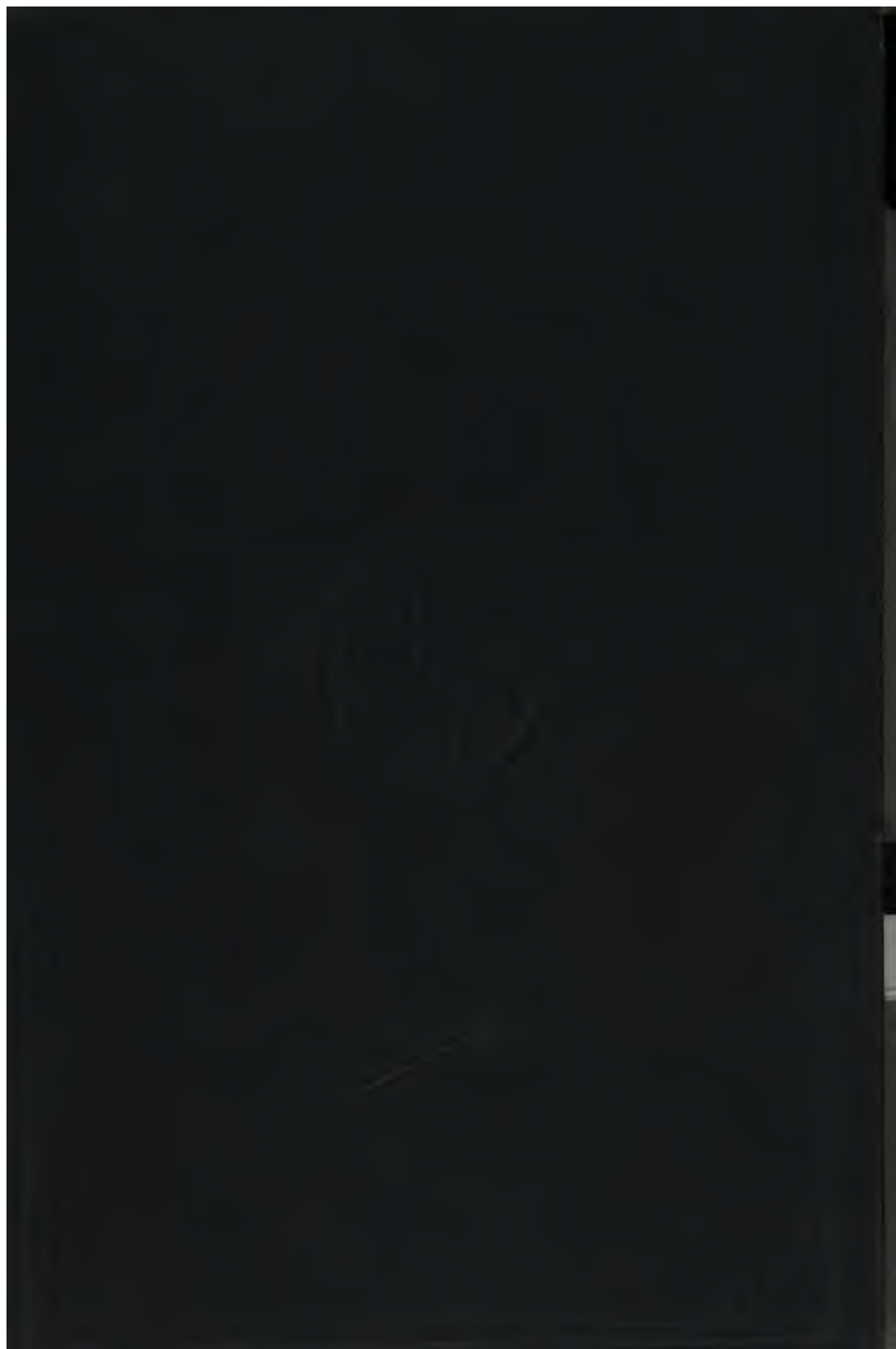
Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>





600073097W



BODLEIAN LIBRARY
OXFORD





600073097W



BODLEIAN LIBRARY

OXFORD

A CHELSEA HOUSEHOLDER.

"Is it a little thing
To have enjoyed the sun,
To have lived light in the spring,
To have loved, to have thought, to have done?"

M. ARNOLD.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



LONDON:

SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON, SEARLE & RIVINGTON,
CROWN BUILDINGS, 188, FLEET STREET.

1882.

(All rights reserved.)

251. h. 177.

LONDON :
PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED,
STAMFORD STREET AND CHARING CROSS.

CONTENTS OF VOL. I.



| CHAPTER | PAGE |
|---------------------------------------|------|
| I. AN ART STUDENT | I |
| II. A CONFERENCE | 24 |
| III. A RETROSPECT | 47 |
| IV. IN WHICH MISS ELLIS LOSES HER WAY | 97 |
| V. AN APOSTLE OF WORK | 140 |
| VI. AN AFTERNOON CALL | 178 |
| VII. MORNING CARES | 214 |
| VIII. "UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE" | 236 |

A CHELSEA HOUSEHOLDER.



CHAPTER I.

AN ART STUDENT.

THE New Forest of Hampshire, always sylvan and enjoyable, is never perhaps so sylvan, or so pre-eminently enjoyable, as in the latter end of May; a fact of which Miss Muriel Ellis was well aware when she decided upon making it the scene of her month's holiday. Miss Ellis was an artist; not—as she herself would eagerly have assured you—an amateur, but a genuine professional, with dreams, vague, but none the less alluring, of triumphs and successes to be won by the aid of her brush. At the time at which this story opens, she

was, however, only in the Academy—that is, in its schools—where she had been for the last three years, and where she expected to be for another half-year more. The discipline and routine of these schools is sometimes declared to have a repressive and even benumbing effect upon youthful genius, curbing it to an extent which it rarely afterwards recovers. Without at all venturing to say that Muriel Ellis possessed genius, I may certainly—if only for the credit of that establishment—take it upon me to assert, that no training to which she had been subjected had at all succeeded in curing her of her flights. She was, indeed, endowed with a happy audacity, to which nothing in the way of art came amiss. Ever since her small fingers could find their way round a crayon there were few objects in heaven, on earth, nor yet under the earth, which she would not promptly have undertaken to draw.

Previously to going to the Academy, she had been in the habit for some years of attending a painting school, where a different and a very much laxer system of discipline prevailed, and there it had become a sort of common habit to hand over any particularly troublesome bit of drawing, any unusually restive head, or knee, or eye, or fold to Muriel Ellis, who would be certain to have finished her own work, and to be only too ready and willing to undertake anybody else's. She was, indeed, devoted, utterly devoted, to her art; and yet—if the reader will kindly understand the seeming contradiction—she was, nevertheless, at times, haunted with a sort of half scorn for it—for that phase, at all events, which had chiefly lain under her own observation. The thing, in truth, came to her *too* easily; so easily that she was apt to be contemptuous, and even a trifle sceptical, as regards the very existence of those diffi-

culties before which her less ready-eyed and nimble-fingered neighbours stood aghast. In a word, she possessed in a high degree the gift of facility; a fatal gift, according to all competent authority, but still not the less one which confers a great, a peculiar, and a quite incommunicable species of enjoyment upon its fortunate possessor.

In another and a less questionable respect Miss Ellis was also blessed above the general run of her artistic fraternity. She was the owner of a fortune, not large, perhaps, in the fortune-hunting sense, but still quite large enough to make it pretty clear that she would never have seriously to fall back upon her own brush for support. Indeed, I should myself be inclined to call her an heiress, but that the traditions attaching to that word are of so impressive and imposing a character that the modest fortunes of my heroine would forthwith, I fear, become ridiculous beside

them. As a matter of fact (and on such subjects readers, I think, like ample facts), Muriel possessed an income of about fifteen hundred pounds a year, chiefly derivable from certain moneys in the funds, a portion of which had lately been invested in the purchase of a house in London. Miss Ellis was an orphan, but her fortune had come to her not from either of her parents, but from a brother, whose death had occurred some eight years earlier, when our heroine was not quite fourteen. She was now of age, and had been of age for rather more than a year, but beyond the purchase of the house above referred to, that fact had not made any material difference in her way of life, and she had been quietly pursuing her art studies with a steadiness and a conscientiousness, all the more praiseworthy in that there were not of course wanting people to suggest that for a young lady so handsome

and so well endowed, there were plenty of livelier amusements than sitting all day upon a high stool, and smudging her fingers with stumps and charcoal. At present, however—at the time, that is, at which she first makes the reader's acquaintance—she was longing, not indeed to lay aside her brush, but to exercise it in a new direction. She was a trifle weary, it must be owned, of that routine to which she had hitherto submitted herself; tired of the "antique" and of the "life;" of the stereotyped artistic models, and the no less stereotyped artistic talk. For the last month or more she had been pining to get away from London; to get away somewhere or other by herself; set up her own easel, study her own effects, and work out her own theory of art, uncontrolled and undisturbed by any extraneous authority or influence whatsoever. For all that you are not to suppose that Miss Ellis had really come down to

Hampshire alone. Nothing of the sort. She was accompanied by a friend ; one, too, who was not only one of the most discreet of companions, but who in point of age might very nearly have been that young lady's mother. Miss Elizabeth Prettyman was an artist also, but one of a very different type from Muriel. Now and then, at long intervals, she painted an original picture (generally a bunch of pelargoniums, or a couple of roses in a Japanese vase), and now and then, at still longer intervals, sold one ; but her regular vocation was that of a copyist. She was, indeed, the most admirable and exact of copyists. To see her at work before a Metsu, a Van der Helst, or a Terborch (she preferred the Dutch school to every other), was in itself a study. If she did not (as some declared) actually reproduce the very cracks which time had imprinted upon those master-pieces, it may at any rate be safely asserted

that it was the only thing which she did *not* reproduce. Everything, from the wrinkles, which it required a magnifying glass to detect, down to the lightest and most apparently accidental smudge—the faintest “stain upon a brick, or smoke-dulled slip of greenery in a window,” was copied and recopied with a care and a patient fidelity which was really in its way pathetic. For nearly twenty years her well-scraped palette, and small, alert, somewhat angular figure, had been nearly as familiar to the *habitués* of the National Gallery as any of the pictures upon the walls. Unfortunately, copying, no matter how sedulously it may be pursued, is seldom a very lucrative vocation—at all events, Miss Prettyman had not found it so. On the present occasion this fact was of less consequence, however, than usual, the whole expense of the trip being clearly understood to be defrayed by Miss Ellis,

who indeed had planned the expedition to the full as much in her friend's interests as in her own. Their first night had been spent at a small hotel in one of the least frequented and most picturesque of the villages which stud the recesses of the forest, where their windows looked out upon the little rustic street, with its scattered shops and low eaves, round which the swallows and martins were just now industriously flitting. Still, if both quaint and comfortable, this retreat was neither remote enough nor yet independent enough for Muriel Ellis, who panted to establish as complete a contrast with her late surroundings as it was possible to achieve. Accordingly, the afternoon after their arrival, she started forth upon a reconnoitring expedition, bent upon discovering some abode, or portion of an abode, which she and her friend would have the right, temporarily, at all events, to call their own.

Miss Prettyman was not at any time much of a walker, and on the present occasion was anxious, as Muriel knew, to finish a letter, so the latter young lady set forth on her peregrinations alone. She was, indeed, far too independent, and far too well accustomed to long solitary London rambles, to have hesitated about adventuring herself, even had the region been a much less rurally and distinctively innocent one than the New Forest. Moreover, her drive yesterday from the station, and the glimpses seen from her bedroom window had inspired her already with an enthusiasm, a love at first sight, for her new surroundings, which enthusiasm she privately wished to indulge, at all events at first, undeterred by the presence of her friend, whose better balanced and staidier disposition could hardly be expected to sympathize much with such vagaries. As she stood at her bedroom window, waiting

for an umbrella which a good-natured chamber-maid had undertaken to hunt for, that enthusiasm was very near the surface. A light, sunshiny shower was passing over the country—so light, indeed, that a white butterfly, intent upon some domestic concerns amongst the cabbages below the windows, had failed to take any notice of the fact. A little beyond the cabbages a small brown wren—the merest atom of fluff and feathers—was hopping up and down some beanstalks, jerking its tail, and producing an amount of sound which seemed utterly disproportionate to the size of its throat. Beyond the cabbages and the beanstalks was a narrow enclosed paddock, where the corncrakes were calling to one another with harsh iteration out of the clover, and where the back of a red cow just showed beyond the hawthorns of the hedge. At this hedge began the forest, sweeping away in great billowy

curves and undulations ; every bare spot being filled with a purple haze, beautiful in itself and beautifying everything it rested on. Raindrops innumerable glittered over the earth. Overhead the clouds were hurrying briskly away. Suddenly a great gust of wind came sweeping across the forest, bringing with it a faint far-off resinous scent from the fir-trees. Muriel caught up her hat, and, forgetting all about the lost umbrella, ran hastily down the stairs and out into the village street.

Here she was met by a small flock of school children, trooping by on their way from school, so stopped a minute to let them pass, noting, with all a Londoner's keen appreciation, the roundness of the limbs and ruddiness of the cheeks thus suddenly presented to her view. Without at all aspiring to the character of a Lady Bountiful, Miss Ellis, in her quality of householder, had of late given herself with

a good deal of zest to the ministrations of her own immediate neighbourhood, and now the sight of these small pinafores and corduroyed scholars conjured up the remembrance of sundry other little Jackys and Tommies left behind amongst the back alleys of Brompton and Chelsea, whose cheeks were by no means so red, or their legs and arms so fat and prosperous looking, and she began to ask herself penitently whether there was not a decided selfishness—none the less insidious because so common—in being so exceedingly glad to get away herself, while others—so many others—were not free to get away at all. Why, after all, should she enjoy a holiday, and revel in country sights, and be free to pick the first cowslips and primroses, while Jacky and Tommy, and the innumerable other little Jackys and Tommies, to whom the cowslips and primroses belonged far more by prescriptive right, had no such

chance, but must stay where they were—luckless little prisoners whom it was no one's interest or business to set free? It was a characteristic thought, and one which haunted her more or less all day. At present, however, it was obvious that it could bear no profitable fruit, so, thrusting it away from her with an effort, she started off down the little ill-paved village street, looking eagerly to right and left at all the pleasant novel sights about her; the old, old houses, with their newly painted woodwork; the quaint corners and dormers and gables; the shops of the taxidermist and entomologist—which latter seemed to form the chief part of the trading population—all the sleepy life and tranquil bustle, in short, of the little place. There were no tourists as yet in the forest; the hunting season, of course, was over, so that strangers were scarce, and Muriel attracted a good many rustic eyes as she walked

along, herself by no means the least pleasant part of the pleasant picture ; her plain grey dress (she was not at all given happily to exemplifying art in her own person) fluttering lightly in the warm, light breeze. Presently she left the village, and struck out upon a long green road, bordered with horse-chestnut trees, the latter just beginning to expand into pinky blossom. White or grey fronted houses here and there showed themselves through the trees ; but the hedges, still gay with their spring splendour, hid out anything like a detailed view. Overhead, the sky was all that a May sky ought to be ; linnets and chaffinches were busy amongst the chestnut flowers ; bees, yellow with pollen and big with importance, dashed hurriedly to and fro over the dry grass ; the whole air and sky and scene seemed redolent of the spring.

As she walks along the green-shaded

roadway—with the shadows playing over her, and the ripples of light sketching fantastic patterns upon her dress—seems a becoming moment, as becoming a one at least as I am likely to find, for furnishing the reader with that detailed report of my heroine's appearance without which no romance, however otherwise circumstantial, seems ever to be held complete. To begin, then, Muriel was tall, with a slight, erect figure, a quick step, and an air of youth and vigour which did the beholder good to look at. Her face was oval, as nearly oval at least as a face can be in which the chin is a good deal more pronounced than is usual in classic beauties. The cheeks were pale, paler than they had any business to be, judging by the rest of the physique, the most noticeable fact in point of colouring being that the eyes, hair, brows, and lashes were all of the same, or pretty nearly the same, colour—a

deep dark brown, inclining to chestnut above the temples, from which the hair was brushed courageously back, so as to form a small loose knot at the back of the head. Her eyes—not, perhaps, by the way, a strikingly original trait in a heroine—were large and bright; indeed, brighter or pleasanter eyes have seldom looked out of a woman's face, their beauty consisting less in their size or colour than in this very vividness and brightness which seemed to shine out of the irises themselves. For all that, the face in repose was not exactly a bright one, or rather, the brightness came to it only by fits and starts, its prevailing expression being a somewhat sober one, a sobriety giving way, however, at a touch, and being replaced by a peculiarly sunshiny smile and glance. At the present moment she was eager, restless, glad to escape from London; excited like a child at the

thought of this great, and to her, unknown and mysterious forest which lay around ; delighted to get away from the drill of the schools, but eager to plunge again into fresh work, and to try her strength upon this new and as yet untried field which lay around her. Before anything else, however, could be done it was obviously necessary to secure that house, or portion of a house, in which she and Elizabeth Prettyman were to set up their easels and paint-pots, and to this task accordingly she addressed herself.

For some time her efforts seemed doomed to failure. In vain she walked up and down the roads ; in vain she peered into every house, and inquired of every passer-by. Nothing in the least degree answering their needs seemed forthcoming. Indeed, there appeared to be no alternative between the humblest of two-room cottages, and mansions or villas

standing back in dignified seclusion, with their own gardens and offices, green-houses, and double coach-houses, where it would be very little short of an impertinence to apply. So far, however, she had only been exploring the immediate neighbourhood of the village, whereas her real hope and dream was to find a retreat in the very heart of the forest itself, away from all others, and neighboured only by the squirrels and the woodpeckers. Seeing, therefore, a long, green-margined path stretching away into an apparently endless vista of greenery, she turned, and boldly adventured herself down it, half laughing at her own confidence, half believing that somehow or other that confidence would be rewarded by coming upon exactly that picture of rural comfort and picturesque seclusion which she had already imaged in her own mind.

While her more adventurous companion

was thus engaged, Miss Prettyman sat at home, and wrote her letters and unpacked her needlework, and got out her palettes and brushes and various paraphernalias ready to set to work next day. Although on pleasure bent, she had no intention of being idle—no more intention, in fact, than had her friend. In her case years, however, had brought discretion, and she somewhat misdoubted of her own ability to deal with these tangled foregrounds, and desperately complicated vistas and copses at which Muriel proposed dashing so lightly. Consequently she had been careful to provide herself beforehand with work in the shape of three or four miniatures which had been entrusted to her to copy and enlarge. This was a species of work in which Miss Prettyman excelled, her patience and truly marvellous conscientiousness enabling her to reproduce line for line, and touch for touch, all the half-evaporated

grace and bygone charm of the originals. It was not work, however, which could be attempted in any but the best light, so, having set everything in readiness for the morning, she took up her needlework—not crewels I assure you, reader, but the plainest and most uncompromising of plain stitchings—and sat herself down near the window to wait for her friend's return.

By this time she was beginning to be not a little uneasy at the latter's non-appearance. What could have delayed her? She had promised to be back at five, and here it was nearly six! Could anything have happened? Suddenly a dreadful thought crossed her mind. Suppose Muriel had lost herself in the forest? Miss Prettyman was particularly ignorant—more ignorant even than the generality of Londoners—on everything that related to the country, being filled with suspicions,

vague but none the less sinister, of everything extending beyond the twelve-mile radius; and now, as this dreadful notion crossed her mind, she began rapidly conjuring up all the terrors she had ever heard, or read, or dreamt, or imagined in connection with forests and people lost or strayed in them. What *was* to be done? Here was the afternoon passing on; the evening would soon come, and then night. What if Muriel never returned? She got up and hurried over towards the fireplace, her mind anxiously running over all the exigencies of the case. Ought she not, she thought, to summon the waiter and the landlord? call in the police—if police, indeed, there were to be had—and insist upon their all going out immediately in search of her friend? Her hand was upon the bell-rope, and then again she hesitated. Supposing—after all that Muriel should be only taking a walk, and should

presently reappear? How vexed she would be; how annoyed that such a fuss should have been made about her behalf! And yet, on the other hand, if she *was* lost, why then obviously every moment was of value. Who could tell what might not have happened? Who could tell to what dreadful dangers she might not at that very moment be exposed? Dropping the bell-rope, she hastened over to the window. Everything looked sleepy and tranquil-minded enough to have inspired confidence into even the most perturbed of breasts; still Miss Prettyman felt anything but reassured, and was just upon the point of herself sallying forth in search of her lost friend, when a light step was heard upon the stairs, and Muriel, her pale cheeks glowing with exercise, and her arms laden with the honeysuckles and bryonias she had stolen from the hedges, burst into the room.

CHAPTER II.

A CONFERENCE.

"OH, Elizabeth, I've had such a walk!" she exclaimed, flinging herself into a chair and tossing her burden down upon the table.

"Have you, dear? Well, I'm sure I'm only too thankful to see you back, Muriel. You don't know how uneasy I have been about you!"

"Uneasy? Why, what was there to be uneasy about?"

"I thought you were lost in the forest."

Muriel laughed. "I wonder if any one could be lost there if they tried," she said.

"However, I did go a long way—four or five miles, I'm sure."

"And did nothing really happen?"

"Happen? No! What in the world should happen?"

"Oh, well, I don't quite know," Miss Prettyman said, beginning to feel that her late panic was perhaps, after all, a little premature. "Still there always *are* dangers in a place of this kind," she added insistantly. "No, don't laugh, dear; there really are. You quite forget you're not in London. Why, only think of all those loose cows and horses we saw yesterday; and then wild stags, and drunken men, perhaps—who knows?"

Muriel only laughed the more. "Well, all I can say is that I met with none of them," she said; "but I did meet with something much more to the purpose, and that was a house, and one, too, that I think will suit us."

"A house? Oh, really!" Miss Prettyman exclaimed, her thoughts suddenly starting off into a new channel. "But a *whole* house, Muriel? Won't that be dreadfully expensive?"

"On the contrary, very cheap; cheaper even than this hotel."

"Well, then, I really am glad to hear that, dear; very glad indeed," the elder lady said earnestly. "I did not mention the subject before, because I know it annoys you, but I have been feeling extremely uncomfortable at all the expense you are going into here. A sitting-room, which every one knows is such an extra, and then our dinner last night—soup and fish, you know, and chickens—and then all that pastry!"

Miss Ellis began laughing again. "Yes, and salt, and pepper, and mustard. Certainly we have been extravagant. Shall I tell the waiter that to-night we shall only

want one salt-cellar, and that you will not mind doing without any pepper—shall I ?” stretching out her hand towards the bell-rope.

“ Now you are only making fun of me, dear,” Miss Prettyman said plaintively.

“ Well, you absurd Elizabeth, and how do you expect me not to make fun of you when you have such ridiculous notions ? Will you truly and seriously tell me that you think a jam-puff more or less is going to ruin either of us ? ”

“ Us ! It certainly won’t ruin *me*, because, as you know very well, I do not pay for it. But it really makes me very uncomfortable, Muriel—it does indeed—to think of your money going for all these sort of things, and, of course, my being with you must add so greatly to the expense.”

Miss Ellis sprang up impatiently from her chair.

"Now, Elizabeth, please listen to me," she said; "once for all, I won't have this sort of thing going on; I won't indeed. You must be reasonable."

"I hope I always am reasonable, dear."

"On every other subject, I grant you, but not on this; on this you are a perfect monomaniac. Would you have had me come down here alone? Just now answer me that."

Miss Prettyman shook her head. "No, dear, I suppose not," she said dubiously.

"Well, then, would you have had me advertise for a companion? 'A young person, aged twenty-two, manners pleasing, temper amiable,'—I should have to describe myself as amiable in an advertisement, you know—'is anxious to meet with a lady who will kindly undertake the care of her during a short sojourn in the New Forest. No remuneration, but every

comfort supplied.' Is that the sort of thing you would have proposed?"

Miss Prettyman shook her head again.

"Well, then, as a last resource would you have had me persuade Sophia Skynner into coming down with me?" Miss Ellis said, throwing herself back into her chair with an air of triumph.

"Oh no, dear, of course not; that would have been entirely out of the question," Miss Prettyman said, with unusual animation.

"Well then, there it is! You see now, you are obliged to admit that the obligation is on my side, and not on yours. And that brings us back to the original point. Since you *are* here, will you kindly tell me why, in the name of sense and reason, you shouldn't eat a jam puff as well as another person?"

Miss Prettyman sighed. "I can't help it, dear. I dare say I am silly," she said

dolefully, "but all the same I do not like your spending your money upon me—more, at least, than can be helped."

Her companion made another gesture of impatience; then, crossing the room, laid both hands impressively upon her arm.

"Do you know, Elizabeth, you are really extremely unkind," she said seriously. "Have I such a prodigious number of friends, that I am to be deprived of the society of the very few I do possess? And is there any one else in the whole world that I know so well, or have known so long as I have known you—you, that is, and your mother? Just now answer me honestly that."

"Perhaps not, Muriel."

"*Perhaps*, you unnatural Elizabeth! You know very well that there is not."

"Well, there is your cousin, Lady Rushton; she is very fond of you."

"Lady Rushton is very kind, and I think, as you say, she likes me ; but I do not belong to her in any way. If I were to die to-morrow she would be sorry, but it wouldn't make the smallest atom of difference to her in reality ; whereas to you and your mother it would."

"Yes, it would," Miss Prettyman said simply ; there did not seem to be any need of asseveration upon that point.

"Very well, then, isn't that a proof conclusive that between you and me money is a word that ought not to be so much as breathed ? Besides, if you have chosen to forget all I used to cost you—you and Mrs. Prettyman, I mean—I have not. Why, in money alone—that money you make such a fuss about—just think of what a frightful expense I was to you formerly !"

"Indeed, Muriel, you were nothing of the kind !" Miss Prettyman cried indig-

nantly. "The expense was nothing; and if it had been, it was a pleasure."

"Well, you unreasonable Elizabeth, and am I the only person who is never to be allowed a pleasure?"

The elder lady sighed again. "I am sure, dear, I don't want to spoil your pleasure," she said piteously. "And you mustn't think I don't mean to enjoy myself too, only you are so young and——"

"Foolish. Don't hesitate."

"No; I was going to say generous—foolishly generous. It's perfectly dreadful to me to think of that big house of yours in London—servants and a carriage and everything going on, just as if you were there yourself!"

"Oh, as far as that goes, Sophia promised to keep the expenses down as much as possible," Muriel replied carelessly, as she got up and wandered away towards the window.

For all response Miss Prettyman straightened her neck, and drew down the corners of her mouth, in a manner that did not portend any very fervent belief in the promises of the said Sophia.

“Anyhow, here we are, and we’re out for a holiday, and I won’t have my holiday spoilt, or yours either,” Muriel said with decision. “And now I’ll tell you all about the house, or rather the cottage; for it *is* a cottage—not even a cottage *ornée*, but the real thing; with a red roof, and a row of bee-hives in front, and chickens hopping in and out of the windows.”

“Hopping in and out of the windows! Not surely into the sitting-room windows?”—in a tone of dismay.

Miss Ellis laughed. “I can picture you jumping up from your painting and rushing at them with a broom, or perhaps carrying lame ducklings about, wrapped up

in flannel, as I used to do at my grandfather's," she said.

Elizabeth shook her head. "I can't fancy liking to have ducklings and those sort of things very near one, however pretty they may be at a distance," she replied dubiously. "And when have you settled to go to this cottage?" she added.

"On Friday. It has only been empty a few days. Some gentlemen, who were here for the hunting, had it until last week."

"Then I do hope, Muriel, you did not forget to impress upon them the necessity of giving it a thorough cleaning?" her friend said earnestly.

"Well, I'm afraid, do you know, that I did forget. Never mind, though; I'm sure Mrs. Partridge will see to it all right. She seemed a very good sort of woman—rather short in her temper, perhaps, but then no wonder, with such a fearful number of children! Seven, I think she told me she had."

"Seven children ! and will they all be in the house, too ?" Miss Prettyman inquired in a tone of dismay.

"No, no. They have another cottage, a smaller one, close at hand. But I dare say we shall see plenty of them ; one we certainly shall, for I've settled to paint him. A splendid creature, with such a pair of eyes ! I can't think where he got them from ; though the father wouldn't make a bad study either."

"What does he do ? the father, I mean. Has he a trade, or what ?"

"He used to be a soldier, and now I fancy he looks after something in the forest ; but his chief business seems to be as an entomologist. He goes out at night with a dark lantern and a pot of treacle. Some night he has promised to take me."

"A dark lantern and a pot of treacle ! Dear me, what is that for ?"

"To catch moths. The treacle is put

on the trees with a brush ; the moths come to eat it ; then he turns the light upon them, catches them with a net, and pops them into pill-boxes."

"Dear me," repeated Miss Prettyman ; "and what does he do with them when they are caught ?"

"Sells them, I fancy. He showed me whole boxes full—some really beautiful things. Such colours ! One in particular—quite a common grey-looking thing though that was—he assured me he got ten shillings apiece for as many as ever he could catch."

"Then I am afraid, dear, he must be a very untruthful person," Miss Prettyman said indignantly. "No one could possibly be silly enough to give ten shillings for a moth."

"Why not, if it was a very rare one ?"

"What would be the use of it ?"

"Use, you utilitarian Elizabeth ! the

rarity *is* the use. What is the use of half the things people buy—of your pictures and mine, if it comes to that? And yet we should not object to any one giving a big price for them, should we?”

Miss Prettyman sighed. “I am afraid I am not likely to be much tried in that way,” she said. “But you, dear, are different,” she added, brightening. “Every one says you might make a great deal of money by your painting if you chose to work hard; though of course it would be very unreasonable to expect that you should, when you have got such a good fortune of your own already.”

“Now, Elizabeth, you know nothing offends me like that. What have I ever been guilty of, that I should be reckoned amongst the do-nothings? One moment you talk as if I was rushing wildly into the workhouse, and the next as if I was a sort of female Rothschild! Am I to sit

all my life with my hands before me because I happen to have a little, a very little money of my own ? ”

“ Oh no, Muriel, of course not. You know I don't mean that. I only mean that you need not paint more than you are inclined.”

“ I don't know how that may be, but all I know is, that I mean to paint every day and all day long. You see if I don't, the minute we get into this new house of ours.”

“ But if the house is so small, I'm afraid you will find it rather difficult to paint in it, dear. You are used, you know, to such a large studio of your own.”

“ Oh, but I shan't paint in the house. I shall paint out-of-doors ; in the woods— everywhere. I mean to get up at six o'clock and work away all day long. Every tree I passed this afternoon, every pond, and ditch, and cottage, I was longing to have my paints out and to be at them. Such

foregrounds, too !—great green sheets of moss, and brown boggy bits, and delicious splashes of orange and yellow and scarlet, and white silvery-looking things, and long grey wig-like lichens hanging down from all the trees. Flowers, too—some whose very names I don't know. And then coming home, if you could only have seen the gleams along the road, and the distant views, and the red roofs, and a girl coming along with rushes on her back, like a Corot ! Don't think me very idiotic, but really I did feel quite silly with it all. And yet I believe it was nothing out of the way—not at all a particularly fine part of the forest, I mean. The truth is, I had really forgotten what a beautiful place the world was, and no wonder ! Fancy, I have been nine months in London without once leaving it !”

“And I have been nearly nine years,” said Elizabeth Prettyman.

.

“ You poor dear ! Never mind though, we’ll both go back to school again. You shall learn to milk a cow and feed chickens, and I’ll write to London for a botany book, and try to find out all about the mosses and wild flowers I saw to-day, and Mr. Partridge shall teach me all about his moths. Aren’t you glad we came ? I am so glad —so very, very, *very* glad ! ”

She was back now at the window, so that Miss Prettyman was spared the trouble of responding to her leader’s enthusiasm. It was getting towards evening, and in the village the shadows were already long. Leaning out of the window Muriel could see the whole of the little irregular street lying below her, the warm light touching here a window and there a few yards of tiled roof, grey or green with immemorial houseleeks. Rough little country vehicles came rattling or lumbering along the road. A waggon ; a

pony chaise ; a butcher's cart ; then another waggon laden with huge trunks of trees, and boughs still covered with their fresh green foliage. From dozens of small brick chimneys dozens of small grey columns of smoke were slowly rising ; here revolving in tiny rings and spirals against the half-fledged branches of an ash, there mounting in a long straight column until caught and lost in the sunlight overhead. Higher still, large white clouds lay basking lazily in an azure sky ; swallows and martins flew hither and thither, performing the most intricate contortions and evolutions in mid-air. It was not at all like London, and Muriel's spirits mounted higher and higher, and she leaned out further and further from the window, trying to catch a glimpse of that great environment of forest which lay like some leafy ocean around them. Suddenly another and a more rapid sound of wheels was heard, and

a dog-cart came quickly round the corner, crunching noisily over some loose stones which lay before the house. In the dog-cart sat two young men, who gave a simultaneous glance at the figure framed by the window space. Muriel felt herself blushing, and drew back, but not before she had caught both pairs of eyes fixed upon herself. Then the dog-cart drew up at the door of a house on the other side of the way. A servant got down, and went to the horse's head. Next the two young men dismounted, and having paused a moment at the door, evidently to get a key, crossed the road and mounted some steep grass-covered steps leading to a churchyard, which stood a little above the village street.

Muriel glanced after them. One was a small, fair, dapper-looking little man, attired in a light grey shooting-suit, with a brown hat on his head, and a brown pipe in his mouth; the other, long and

lean, dark and angular, was clad from head to heel in sombre black, with a hat of the most indisputably and uncompromisingly clerical cut, very flat in the brim and low in the crown. Muriel, whose cheeks had not quite regained their natural temperature, felt a certain malicious pleasure in contemplating this same blackness and angularity, set off against the pale evening flush of the sky behind. "What mortal with eyes could have devised or would wear such a dress?" she thought. There was not much time, however, to indulge in that or any other maliciousness. Another moment, and the two figures had disappeared round the high-shouldered top of the slope, and with another slight blush at herself, she moved back from the window, and turned to rejoin her companion. Then came a knock at the door, and a waiter (*the* waiter, rather, the only one of which the hotel boasted) entered the room

to lay the cloth for dinner. It was still only a little after six, but old Mrs. Prettyman, Elizabeth's mother, was a person of pre-eminently conservative habits, and Muriel knew that her friend was accustomed to dine early. Indeed, after her own early lunch and long walk through the tangled wood paths, she felt anything but averse to such a notion herself. Gathering up her disorderly armful of leaves and grasses, she went off to her own room to prepare for the meal.

"Shall I tell him about the pepper and salt?" she whispered, as she passed her friend.

Miss Prettyman shook her head reprov-ingly, glancing at the same time timorously in the direction of the waiter.

"And then to-morrow, you know, we can eat some water-cresses under a hedge, and so do without any dinner at all," Muriel added aloud, as she went off to her room.

Miss Prettyman shook her head again with an air of yet stronger disapproval, as the door closed after her. She was perfectly devoted to her companion, and regarded her as a sort of impersonification of all the possible and impossible talents and perfections ; indeed, was in the habit of deferring to her, and accepting all her various crotchets and theories in a way that certainly was not customary at their respective ages. At the same time she never could divest herself of a certain uneasy feeling of responsibility on her account. Muriel was so terribly unconventional. There really was no knowing what vagary, or what artistic or philanthropic freak she might not take it into her head to commit. And, artist though she was herself, Miss Prettyman was a perfect priestess of the proprieties, holding everything like unconventionality in the deepest distrust. And then, again,

Muriel knew nothing, absolutely nothing, of the value of money, which, as she said to herself with a sigh, she undoubtedly did !

CHAPTER III.

A RETROSPECT.

MURIEL ELLIS's circumstances had indeed been somewhat peculiar. She belonged about equally to two very dissimilar stratas of society. Her mother was the daughter of a Norfolk farmer; not a gentleman farmer even in the most liberal sense of the word, but a man who, if he did not actually follow his own plough, at all events kept a remarkably near and sharp look-out upon those who did. A hard, close-fisted man, not without his redeeming points, but narrow, griping, angular; wedded to his own interests, and harder than the nether millstone wherever those interests were touched

or affected. Mrs. Ellis had been twice married. In the first instance to a Mr. Thomas Skynner, then manager of a bank in the neighbouring county town, and a man very many years older than herself. It had been thought an excellent marriage for little Miss Flack, who had neither fortune nor connections, nor indeed anything but her beauty and amiability to recommend her ; but like a good many other excellent marriages, it had not proved a particularly happy one ; and when, some six or seven years after, Mr. Skynner died, the young widow determined upon leaving the county town, in which she had hitherto lived, and with her only child, a boy, taking up her residence in London. Her chief, though not perhaps her most ostensible reason for this change, had been the desire to make a home for a brother who had preceded her to London by about a year. Hal Flack and his sister were twins, and

up to the moment of the latter's marriage the two had been inseparable. But the brothers-in-law had never suited, and latterly the dislike had deepened on Mr. Skynner's side into positive detestation, so that the brother and sister had come to be practically parted. Poor Hal Flack was indeed far from being an object of admiration to any of his belongings. An amiable, innocent, heedless sort of being, incapable of injuring a fly, he was apparently equally incapable of turning his attention to farming, or for that matter to any other avocation by which a living is to be made. He painted, too, or fancied he did, such paintings as a man is likely to produce who has never so much as seen a picture (worthy of the name), and is absolutely ignorant of the first rudiments of his art—crude blots, that is to say, of green and blue, impossible landscapes sprinkled over with even yet more impossible cows and sheep.

Had he been an embryo Cuypp or Turner it would, however, have been all the same, as far as his relations were concerned. In their eyes it was the thing itself, and not the way in which the thing was done, which proved incontestably Hal's folly, a folly only unfortunately not sufficiently declared for him to be disposed of once for all out of harm's way. At last the storm, long brewing, burst, and poor Hal escaped to London, with twenty pounds in his pocket, and a vague determination of there seeking his fortune. It need hardly be said that the fortune thus vaguely wooed had not been won, and even before his brother-in-law's death Hal had been more than once reduced to the necessity of appealing to his sister for help. After the latter event these appeals had come oftener, and it was as a sort of final response to them that Mrs. Skynner decided, as I have said, upon herself going up to

London, and there inviting her brother to take up his abode with her.

The experiment on the whole turned out less unsuccessfully than might have been expected. Mrs. Skynner had a slender jointure from her husband and a still slenderer allowance for the keep of her boy, and on this the trio contrived to live. Hal Flack was devoted to his sister, and always amiable and considerate as far as she was concerned ; indeed, if a ne'er-do-weel, it must be owned that he was quite one of the most innocent and guileless of his tribe. He had a knack, too, denied to many a better and a wiser man, of picking up friends along his path, if not always amongst the irreproachables of mankind, at any rate amongst sinners whose offences were of the same comparatively light and venial character as his own. Of these friends Harold Ellis, the man whom young Mrs. Skynner eventually

married, was one. He was of a different and, socially speaking, of a very much higher calibre than any of the men she had hitherto known. Like Hal, however, he had been "dropped" by his relations, a fact which constituted probably the chief link between them. In Harold Ellis's case, however, the drop had been decidedly a deeper one than in his friend's. He had been brought up by his grandfather, a certain old Lord Dumbelton, and it had even at one time seemed by no means unlikely that on his shoulders would eventually devolve the honours of the family, Colonel Ellis, his only surviving uncle, being long married and having no children. This expectation, however, proved fallacious. Lady Catherine Ellis died; the colonel promptly married again, and within a year a son was born. This was the moment judiciously selected by young Mr. Ellis to quarrel with his grandfather, a

choleric old gentleman, who brooked no opposition, and quickly gave his grandson to understand that henceforth his house was no home to him. Young Ellis went to London, where he lived a desultory sort of life upon the remnants of his own small patrimony, and where, as has been said, he met, fell in love with, and eventually married Mrs. Thomas Skynner.

A more improvident, more unjustifiable, and more generally reprehensible marriage, probably never was perpetrated, but for all that it was very far from being an unhappy one. Mrs. Ellis was passionately devoted to her husband; all the love which her hitherto stinted and colourless life had failed to awaken seeming to concentrate itself upon him. Two children, and providentially *only* two, were born. A boy, called John, after his grandfather, John Flack, and a good many years later, a girl, our heroine. Muriel's own

recollections of her father were of a decidedly fragmentary character. She remembered, once upon a time, being taken by him to feed the ducks in the Serpentine, and again, upon another occasion, standing before him in a state of rapt and awe-stricken admiration, as he sat playing the flute in a certain vividly remembered green velvet smoking coat. Then came a dreadful time when for weeks he lay upon the sofa, and when every one went about on tip-toe, and when her mother cried all day long. He died when she was little more than eight, and her brother John—her elder by nearly seven years—barely fifteen.

The death of the head of the family did not materially affect the fortunes of the little household, except in one respect. Mrs. Ellis determined, henceforth, to give up the effort, always a great one to her, of keeping house upon her own account, and

to retire into lodgings. It was this which brought them into contact with the Prettymans. Mrs. Prettyman was a widow also, and, like a good many other people, had seen better days. While her husband lived their income had been a not inconsiderable one, but an unfortunate investment had proved his ruin, and at his death she suddenly found herself brought to the verge, or something unpleasantly like the verge, of starvation. Like every other distressed gentlewoman, she at first tried teaching ; this proving a failure, she next, with some inward reluctance, resolved upon "lodgers." Chance threw the Ellis family in her way—a blessed chance as it turned out for every one concerned. Mrs. Prettyman was one of those women who seem to thrive, and only to thrive in an atmosphere of hard work. Small, slight, and active, with bright brown eyes, and cheeks which to the last preserved much of

their girlish contour, she seemed born to take upon herself all those stray duties and burdens which fall from feebler hands. Some other, and yet more eminent worker, has left on record as his ideal of perfection, the having just more work to accomplish than it was possible for him to get through. Whether she had ever actually formulated it into a creed or not, this apparently was the principle upon which Mrs. Prettyman went. Gentlewoman as she was, and the daughter and granddaughter, moreover, of gentlemen and gentlewomen, there was no household detail, however uninviting, no manual drudgery, however laborious, from which she personally shrank. Her own daughters were never encouraged, or even permitted to take any part in these labours. The eldest, Elizabeth, having her own artistic avocations, while the younger, Alicia, was the hope, beauty, and treasure of the family,

and as such, it was out of the question that she should be allowed to harass herself with house work, or to take upon herself any of those multifarious cares with which her mother's hands were always full to overflowing.

It was into these kind and capable hands, then, that poor Mrs. Ellis, in the hour of her trouble, fell. From that moment the whole responsibility of the Ellis family, the charge of their little money matters, and the ordering and directing of their destinies, passed directly into Mrs. Prettyman's care. It was she who established Hal Flack in small, cheap lodgings close at hand. She who arranged that Muriel was to accompany her own daughter, Elizabeth, to the art school, and there begin her studies under the latter's care. She who, a year or two later, succeeded in obtaining a clerkship for young John Ellis. She, in fact, who did everything that was done, and saw to

everything that had to be seen to, in connection with the family. It is just possible that poor Mrs. Ellis might on the whole have thriven better had she been only forced to bestir herself a little more. As it was, she seemed never to get over the shock of her husband's death ; never to be able to rally, or to hold up her head again in the world ; always gentle and uncomplaining, she sat day after day in her own particular chair, in her own particular corner of the fire-place ; greeting every one with the same unvarying kindness ; always ready to listen and sympathize, but ceasing entirely to exercise anything approaching authority or influence ; gradually, in fact, fading and fading away, until she seemed more like some bodiless visitant, some waif from a further shore, than an ordinary human being, with the ordinary wants and wishes of humanity. When, however, four years after her husband's death, Mrs. Ellis died,

the shock to her children, but especially to Muriel, was terrible. It seemed as if she had never realized the possibility of such a thing—never realized that life could go on and her mother, her gentle, loving mother, whom she herself had never half loved enough, could die and be lost to her ; and all the love, as well as all the passionate rebelliousness of her nature rose up in anger against the blow.

A council had to be held to decide what was to be done with the orphans, or rather with Muriel, John's salary, such as it was, being held sufficient for him to exist upon. Setting aside Hal, whom no one for a moment considered, two possible guardians presented themselves. In the first place there was the old grandfather, John Flack ; in the second place there was the half-brother, Theodore Skynner, now a man of thirty, who had lately married a well-to-do wife, and was living

in some splendour in the neighbourhood of Tooting. Muriel's own wish was to be allowed to stay where she was, under the care of her brother and Mrs. Prettyman; but this obviously was impossible, unless means could be forthcoming for the purpose, the very little Mrs. Ellis possessed having reverted to her eldest son. Fortunately, neither the grandfather nor the half-brother were at all desirous of undertaking the responsibility of her guardianship, the old man's wife being lately dead, and the young man's wife setting her face strongly against the notion of any such inmate in a house chiefly set on foot with her money. As the lesser evil of the two, therefore, a sum was made up, small indeed, but still sufficient to enable Mrs. Prettyman, without any very apparent imprudence, to yield to her own wish, and keep Muriel with her. Accordingly the first floor was let to fresh

lodgers ; a small bedroom was found at the bottom of the house for John, another at the top for Muriel, and the little party, thus reconstructed, soon fell back into its accustomed ways, the girl returning to her art school, the boy to his stool at the office, as if no break had occurred in their lives, and no trouble, blighting and terrible, lay like some dark blot across the past.

But alas ! there was trouble ahead as well as behind. Less than a year after Mrs. Ellis's death, poor John caught a violent cold, which settled upon his chest, and which all Mrs. Prettyman's motherly care, and all her nostrums and poultices were powerless to remove. A doctor had to be sent for, who of course prescribed a southern climate, a prescription which equally, of course, it was utterly out of the question to carry out. His employers were all that was kind, offering to keep

the place open, and even to continue the salary until the young man's return ; but before long it became only too evident that poor John Ellis never would return ; never again climb his tall stool ; never again be anything in life but a helpless invalid ; that, to put it plainly, the poor lad, with his short spell of twenty-one years, was only too surely and certainly—dying.

Even Mrs. Prettyman's courage seemed for a time to flag under this new misfortune. The past season had been anything but a prosperous one, her principal rooms were still unlet, nor did there seem to be the smallest probability of their being taken, and with the winter drawing near, and an invalid on her hands, what wonder if even her courageous soul quailed a little before the prospect. Worse still, John Flack and Theodore Skynner, on being appealed to, both separately but unanimously asserted

the impossibility of their making any further advance, alleging the badness of the times, the expenses of their own households, and all the other time-honoured excuses seldom wanting under such circumstances. What then was to be done? A question which haunted her day and night. Her own friends of course cried out unanimously against the folly of her allowing herself to be burdened with people in no way connected with her; people who were only a trouble and an expense; indeed, this common sense view of the matter could hardly fail to present itself to her own pre-eminently practical mind. And yet, on the other hand, even if she could have made up her mind to part with her charges, John was in no state to be moved. If he left her it could only be to go into a hospital—a conclusion from which she shrank. How propose to part the brother and sister

when it was only too evident that any such parting would be the final one? Under these circumstances Mrs. Prettyman came to a sudden resolution. She resolved, without saying a word to any one, to write to their grand-uncle, Lord Dumbelton, lay before him the state of the case, and appeal to his sense of justice and kinship upon their behalf. Her mind once made up, she was not the woman to delay, and within a day of coming to the resolution the letter was signed, sealed, and despatched, and nothing remained but to wait for the answer.

For nearly a week she waited in vain. At last there appeared a letter, not, indeed, from Lord Dumbelton, but from his wife; a letter stating coldly but politely that her husband was extremely ill, too ill to be troubled upon this or any other subject; but that as her son, Captain Ellis, expected shortly to return to London, he would do

himself the honour of calling and inquiring into the circumstances of the case. A ten-pound note was enclosed for immediate needs. Mrs. Prettyman's bright cheeks burned as she read this letter,—not that there was anything that could be called discourteous in the wording of it, but the whole tone somehow seemed to breathe polite suspicion. Had she felt free to follow her own impulse, the ten-pound note would have returned to Lady Dumbelton by the same post. She was not, however, so foolish. The money had been sent for John, and on John's needs, and the payment of John's doctors, it should accordingly be spent. Already, alas! there were a few debts, and as the illness went on, and the winter advanced, no doubt there would be others. Indeed, many signs in the little household showed that a pinch had already begun. Not only Muriel, who in any case would have

stayed away, but even Elizabeth Prettyman had given up attendance at the Art schools and galleries, the expenses, small as they were, being out of the question at present. That year the winter began unusually early, and by the middle of November the cold was intense. Like everything else in the house, fires were at a low ebb, only two, in fact, being allowed—the indispensable one in the kitchen, and another in the small sitting-room into which John was daily moved, where Muriel drew, and where the family habitually sat. One afternoon it happened, however, that Mrs. Prettyman had gone out, accompanied both by Muriel and Alicia, and Elizabeth Prettyman remained alone with the invalid. It was nearly five o'clock, and the grey London day was dying rapidly. The lights had not yet been lit, and the room was chiefly illuminated by a pale dusky glow, which burned in the hearth. Outside,

the snow lay thick upon the streets, covering the footpaths, and muffling the steps of every passer-by. Thistle Street, in which Mrs. Prettyman's house stood, is not very far from the Fulham Road ; but even in that direction not a sound was to be heard except the occasional discordant drone of a barrel organ, which, like everything else, seemed to be affected by the weather. Now and then, too, a shrill, gasping, long-drawn note came struggling and panting up the kitchen stairs, from where Sarey Jane, the maid-of-all-work, was solacing herself with a little private practice on the concertina. The room in which they were sitting was not exactly ugly, but dull, bleak, and cheerless, as London rooms are apt to be where money is scarce, and the carpets and chintzes have all long shown signs of wanting renewal ; Muriel's array of plaster casts, and an elaborate drawing of a skeleton which stood in a corner, not con-

tributing much to the general enlivenment.

Presently, Elizabeth got up and stirred the fire, which sprang into a brisk blaze, lighting up the figure of the invalid, who lay at full length in a big chair, with his feet propped up on another. Then she lit a candle, and taking up a newspaper, which had been lent that afternoon by a neighbour, ran her eye over it in hopes of finding something to amuse her companion. It was a couple of days old, but none of the party were politicians, so that that was of no particular consequence. Miss Prettyman's own instincts inclined her to those columns where light and social items of information are discussed, and it was while she was on her way thither that she was arrested by the heading of a paragraph—"Another fatal accident in the hunting-field."

"Why, I declare, this must be a relation

of yours, John," she exclaimed. "Listen — 'On Friday last, a melancholy accident occurred during a run of the well-known P—— hounds. The horse ridden by Captain the Honourable Henry Fitzroy Ellis, an officer in Her Majesty's —— regiment of foot-guards, fell whilst endeavouring to cross a large double fence into a road. The animal rolled backwards upon its rider, inflicting injuries of so severe a character that although medical assistance was immediately at hand, the unfortunate gentleman only survived the accident a few hours.' Did you ever hear of anything so shocking? I do really think that those horrible dangerous amusements ought to be put a stop to by Act of Parliament. Only imagine how terrible for his relations, poor young man! Let me see—he must be your first cousin; or no, your first cousin once removed—your great uncle Lord Dumbelton's son."

“Yes, I suppose he must,” young Ellis answered languidly. “But you know I’ve never seen him, or indeed any of them; and they treated my father abominably, so that you can’t expect me to be particularly sorry. All the same, I am sorry for him, poor devil!” he added after a minute. “It’s hard lines on a fellow, certainly, getting killed like that—just, too, when he has everything before him, and is well and able to enjoy himself. Not like me,” the poor lad ended, with a sigh.

“Oh, and here is something more about them!” cried Elizabeth, whose eye had by this time travelled to another paragraph. “‘We regret to learn that Lord Dumbelton, father of the Honourable Henry Ellis, whose death is recorded in another column, and who for some time has been in precarious health, no sooner received the melancholy tidings, than he was seized with renewed paroxysms and expired the

same evening. The remains of the late peer will be interred in the family vault on Tuesday next, at the same time as those of his lamented son.' Dear me, dear me! Only think of that! I don't think I ever heard of anything so shocking in the whole course of my life. I must go out first thing to-morrow morning, and get some black things for Muriel. Such a dreadful ending for a family, too. Or is it the ending? Who succeeds your great-uncle? Who is the present peer? I ought to say."

John Ellis started, and an odd expression came into his face. He sat up in his chair, pushed the other hastily away with his foot, glanced round the room, and then stared hard at Elizabeth Prettyman, as if a ghost had sprung up between them. "The present peer," he repeated slowly; "the present peer! Why, do you know?" and he gave a little laugh, "it seems very

absurd, but really and truly I do think—of course I may be wrong, but really I do believe that it's—me!"

"*You*, John!" Elizabeth Prettyman gasped, the newspaper dropping from her hands from amazement. "*You*! Oh, but that's impossible, quite impossible! It couldn't be."

"It doesn't seem very likely, does it?" he answered, his breath coming fast and short with excitement; "but all the same I don't very well see who else it can be. I know my father would have been the heir if this uncle of his had never married, and I'm sure—at least, pretty sure—that the uncle had only one son. However, we shall know all about it fast enough, that's certain," he added, falling suddenly back again into his chair.

"Oh, it's impossible; quite, quite impossible!" was all that Elizabeth Prettyman could find to say.

Impossible or not, it proved, however, to be the case. Lord Dumbelton, as a matter of fact, *had* only one son—that son who had just met his death in the hunting-field; consequently, at his own death the whole of the estates and possessions of the family, with the exception of a jointure to the widow, and certain sums reserved for the daughters, passed directly to his grand nephew.

Poor John Ellis! Two days ago he had been about the poorest youth in London, a sickly, broken-down clerk, dependent for his daily bread upon the kindness of one upon whom he had no claim, and who herself was one of the poorest of the poor; to-day he was Viscount Dumbelton, of Dumbelton—a peer of the realm, owner of houses and lands, and of an income estimated at not less than eighteen thousand a year! Such revolutions in a man's fortune are always more or less striking and pictur-

esque, but in this case there was something more than this. There was, as every one felt, something cruelly discordant, at once tragic and pitiful, in this sudden heaping up of wealth and power in hands so powerless to hold them—hands which a few weeks, or months at the most, must see laid in the grave. What more piteous could be imagined than the contrast between this superabundance of all that men most covet, and the actual state of the fortunate possessor? “If it could only have been a little, a very little earlier!” his friends thought, with that tightening of the heart which such thoughts bring with them. “If only”—perhaps of all the sad and hopeless words we use, the very saddest and the most hopeless! Of course nothing that money and science could now do was left undone. Doctors came without end, and remedies without end were proposed. Had poor John been in a state to be

moved he might then and there have exchanged his Thistle Street lodgings for a sunlit palace beneath southern skies. If thousands or tens of thousands of pounds would have availed to save him, the thousands and tens of thousands would no doubt have been forthcoming. Unfortunately for all this, it was now too late, as every one who saw him acknowledged with a sigh. As for the poor fellow himself, after the first exaltation, and corresponding depression, he took things very quietly, his chief anxiety being that out of all this superfluity thus transitorily placed in his own grasp, something might be saved for Muriel. At first there seemed to be some little difficulty on this head, the great bulk of the property being strictly entailed, and going with the title. Fortunately, however, certain properties proved to have lapsed absolutely to him, as last in the entail, and these, of course, he could

dispose of as he liked. This done, nothing remained but to sit down quietly and wait—wait for the inevitable.

Curious were the scenes, and curious, too, the encounters which took place there during the next two or three months. Thistle Street is very far from being a fashionable locality, but even Thistle Street sprang into sudden note in the interest which encircled the case. All the relations and connections of the Ellis family—people who had never even so much as known of the existence of the brother and sister—all flocked to call and inquire; some with offers of assistance, others to make inquiries, all to exhibit interest and sympathy. Had Mrs. Prettyman been cynically inclined, or given to indulge in harsh views of her fellow mortals, she might have found materials for a good many private gibes and homilies in all this sudden eagerness and *empressement*.

Why had none of these fine people cared to discover their relations a little sooner ? she might have asked. This was not at all her way, however ; she took things as they came, and was not to be moved out of her usual quiet, even when Mr. and Mrs. Skynner, who for the last year and a half had apparently forgotten the very whereabouts of the orphans, drove up nine times from Tooting in the course of one week to inquire.

Unfortunately, all this care and attention, all these calls and condolences, all these civilities and visiting cards, failed to keep poor young John Ellis in the world. Within a year of his original attack, and less than four months after he had come into his tremendous windfall, he died, and all his possessions—houses, lands, estates, title, as well as the greater part of the income—passed to a distant cousin.

When the will was read it was found

that John Flack the grandfather, and Mrs. Prettyman had been appointed Muriel's guardians, a certain annual sum being set aside for her maintenance, the rest to accumulate until her coming of age. Then followed fresh arrangements, and fresh consultations amongst the relations. What was to be done with Muriel? She was now fourteen; seven years, consequently, must elapse before her coming of age. How, where, and with whom was that interval to be spent? At last, after a good deal of pro-ing and con-ing, it was decided that two months in the year were to be spent with her grandfather in Norfolk, the rest with her other guardian in London. So the years slipped on until the time of her coming of age drew near, when two other events of some importance occurred.

The first of these was the sudden bankruptcy, followed by the no less sudden

disappearance, of Mr. Theodore Skynner, which took place about six years after his half-brother's death. For some time back the establishment at Tooting had been suspected to be on a precarious footing ; Mr. Skynner having speculated largely, both with his own and his wife's fortune, and the speculations having as a rule turned out disastrously. At last the crash came. The unfortunate Theodore escaped at dead of night, leaving his wife and his unpaid debts behind him, and was believed to have taken refuge in Belgium. At the time the affair created a good deal of stir ; the creditors indignantly announcing their intention of putting the law in force and dragging him back to answer for his offences at the bar of justice, when suddenly all proceedings were brought to an end by the unexpected death of the culprit, which occurred at an obscure lodging in the neighbourhood of Antwerp. Muriel had

seen so little of her half-brother in the course of her life, that her own grief at his loss was naturally not a little alloyed by her shame and horror at the disgrace of the whole affair; a disgrace which seemed to her to attach largely to herself. Had she been free to dispose of her own money she would, then and there, unhesitatingly have beggared herself rather than that a debt should have remained unpaid. Fortunately for her future interests, neither of her guardians, however, would hear of anything of the kind; and as she was still under age, there was nothing for it but to submit. In the end the usual arrangement was come to; the creditors consenting to accept a moiety of their claims, the house and furniture at Tooting being sold for what they would fetch, and Mrs. Skynner retiring to live with her own relations, who were understood to be persons of

some consideration, in the neighbourhood of Liverpool. A year later, when all this excitement had somewhat quieted down, and even Muriel herself was beginning to doubt whether her first impulse had not on the whole been rather Quixotic, perhaps, than justifiable, another series of events occurred, less important possibly in themselves, but more directly affecting the interests and fortunes of our heroine.

For some time back, Muriel had had her eye fixed upon a particular house in the locality known to the London Directory as Cheyne Walk—a house with iron gates leading into a tiny tangled courtyard or garden, where overgrown hollies and laurestinas nearly brushed one another across the footpath—a house fronted with red bricks, which time and smoke had long since reduced to a fine neutral tint; with a balcony too, commanding a long stretch of

the river, with its perpetually fluctuating freight of boats and barges. She had never been inside this house, but had passed it often in her walks, had ascertained that it was to be had, and had set her heart on being the possessor. Fortunately, there were no particular difficulties in the way. The locality was an improving one. The new Embankment, then in course of completion, would doubtless make it more so, consequently that eminent firm to whom her financial interests had been confided saw no objection to their client disposing of a portion of her capital in this manner. Whether or no, Muriel was now of age, knew her own mind, and most assuredly would have had her own way. The house accordingly was bought, and our heroine, accompanied by Mrs. Prettyman and Elizabeth (Alicia having by this time fulfilled the expectations of her family and married

advantageously), went to take up their abode in it.

It was not without some little difficulty that Mrs. Prettyman had been brought to agree to this step. A more independent little woman never trod the earth, and to live in another person's house, eat the bread of idleness, and be benefited instead of benefiting, by no means accorded with her notions of what was either honest or becoming. Muriel, however, would take no denial. Was Mrs. Prettyman, she asked, going to desert her? Did she think that she could live alone or was capable of managing a big house by herself? Above all, was it not evident—truly and honestly evident—that she and Elizabeth required a larger studio, with better light and more elbow-room than it was possible for them to have where they were? Of course she carried her point. The little house in Thistle Street was

given up, the greater part of the furniture sold, a few beloved old chairs and tables being conveyed to the new abode, where for weeks after their installation Muriel and Elizabeth were engaged in transforming the whole of the first floor into a room which was to combine all the advantages of sitting-room and studio, to be the very quintessence and embodiment of all imaginable comfort and convenience; with the biggest easels and the deepest chairs; the most elaborate contrivances for containing paints and palettes and brushes; with lamps to stand and lamps to lower; with brackets for statues, and shelves for pottery; with a work-table for Mrs. Prettyman—in short, with everything that their united imaginations could desire or conceive. At length everything was finished; the last tradesman was safely seen off the premises; the chairs and easels were all in their places; the

pots and pans and bits of artistic stuffs were all hung up on the walls ; Mrs. Prettyman had taken possession of her table ; the light was adjusted to a nicety, and everything arranged — so Muriel declared—for life.

In this, however, she reckoned without her host. One evening, not many months after they had gone to live upon the Embankment, a cab, covered with luggage, was seen to draw up at the iron gate. Out of this cab stepped a lady attired in the deepest mourning, who, upon entering the house, flung her arms around Muriel with an air of profound emotion. This lady, it need hardly be said, was Mrs. Theodore Skynner. She had arrived in London, she informed them, that afternoon from Liverpool, with the intention of consulting a physician. Would Muriel, she inquired, give her hospitality for a night —only one night ?

Of course the boxes were straightway conveyed upstairs, the young mistress of the house herself going a stage higher, and vacating her own room in honour of the guest. The next day Mrs. Skynner devoted to repose, but on the one following, the visit to the doctor was paid, and the result confided in strict confidence to Muriel. On one point especially he had been explicit. On no account must Mrs. Skynner think of returning to Liverpool. With such an organization as hers it was as much as her life was worth again to expose herself to the chill breath of that ungenial climate. Mrs. Skynner was in despair. Nothing, she declared, could have been more inconvenient. Her relations would assuredly never forgive her for deserting them ; but then, on the other hand, health was the first of blessings, and Liverpool certainly *was* a cold place. Would Muriel assist her to look for a

cheap, a very cheap London lodging? Of course to this there could be only one answer. Mrs. Skynner must consider the house in Cheyne Walk her home for as long as it suited her to stay. It soon became evident that it decidedly *did* suit her to stay. Days rolled to weeks, and weeks to months, and still Mrs. Skynner remained; indeed after the first few days the question of her departure was not even so much as mooted. Nor was it long before another fact became scarcely less evident, and that was that the same house could hardly with comfort contain both her and the Prettymans. How and when this impression first arose Muriel never could exactly make out. Mrs. Skynner was apparently civil even to graciousness, while Mrs. Prettyman's manners were always easy and kindly; yet none the less the feeling of discomfort grew and grew upon them all. Indeed, when one considers the inevitable

wear and tear, the daily and hourly friction where four people—all of more or less different tastes and dispositions—have to meet and live together, it does not require any extraordinary ingenuity to foresee that sooner or later difficulties will arise. Mrs. Prettyman, at all events, was much too wise a woman to contend against the inevitable. She could not conscientiously advise Muriel to withhold her hospitality from one who was after all her nearest, or almost her nearest, relation ; while, on the other hand, her own independence was dear to her, and to live in a house where her presence was no longer needed was to her impossible.

In vain Muriel fought against this decision ; in vain she brought forward every argument which had been used before—not one of which, she declared, was in the least affected by her sister-in-law's presence. Mrs. Prettyman was inexor-

able. Still Muriel could not and would not believe that her friends really proposed to desert her, and it was not until she found them actually engaged in looking at houses in the neighbourhood, that she realized the gravity of the situation. Then she grew desperate; flew off early one morning to a house agent, thence to her own lawyers, and returned a few hours later with the lease of a house in her possession. Next she sought an interview with her sister-in-law. Sophia had asked her, she said, some time back to help her to look for lodgings, now she in her turn had come to ask a favour of her. Would Sophia accept the lease which she held in her hand? The house was not large, would be hardly more expensive than a lodging, was in a good situation, and promised to be comfortable; in any case, if anything was wanting, she, and not Sophia, would be the person responsible,

and again Muriel, with some diffidence, held forth her lease.

No, Mrs. Skynner would do nothing of the kind ; on the contrary, she professed herself deeply hurt and offended that her sister-in law should have thought of such a thing ; should have even *dreamt* of making her such a proposal. Had she not, she asked with floods of tears, suffered enough *already* at the hands of the family ? Her money taken from her ; herself deserted in her bitterest need ; left at last with nothing, or hardly anything, to support existence ; she who, until her marriage, had never known a wish or a want, but had been brought up in the utmost luxury and comfort ! Was not all *this*, she asked, enough, without such a crowning insult being offered her ? To be asked to live in a house of her sister-in-law's providing—an almshouse !—to be Muriel's pensioner ! No, she would return to Liverpool at once

—that very night. What matter if the climate did disagree with her? What matter if it killed her? Anything was better than to remain where she was, subject to such cruel, cruel humiliations.

She went—but only as far as the door. Muriel followed, full of contrition, beseeching and imploring of her to remain. Her appeal had struck home. All the girl's generosity and chivalry of feeling was aroused at the notion of having insulted one who stood to her in so peculiar a relation ; who had already suffered, as she said, at the hands of the family. True, Muriel had been in no way responsible for those sufferings, which, unless report spoke falsely, had been largely brought about by that lady's own extravagance. This dispassionate view of the matter was the last, however, to strike our impulsive young lady under the circumstances. The conversation of course ended in her en-

treating Mrs. Skynner as a favour to herself to remain where she was, a favour which was, after due reluctance, agreed to ; and in this way peace was made.

It was then that Mrs. Skynner brought forward a new suggestion. Why should not the house, she asked, be offered to the Prettymans ? Not, she assured Muriel, that she herself was at all desirous of their departure—quite the contrary ; still, if they *would* go, it certainly would simplify matters that a house should be ready for their reception. This, indeed, was a turning of the tables ! Apart altogether from her own preferences in the matter, Muriel at first was inclined to resent the suggestion strongly on her friends' behalf. She could hardly—after what had passed—tell Mrs. Skynner in so many words that nothing would induce her so to offend Mrs. Prettyman's independence ; but that, nevertheless, was the feeling in her own mind.

Little by little, however, it came to be felt by every one that this was a way, and in fact the only way, out of the dilemma. The lease was taken and could hardly be given up again; Mrs. Prettyman wanted a house, and the one Muriel had secured seemed as likely to suit her as any other. As for taking it at a gift or even at a loan, that she declared positively to be out of the question; still, if independent to a fault, she was not idiotically so, and it was undeniable that she had been put to some loss and no little inconvenience by the summary breaking up of her home, and the dispersal of her own small properties. She was willing therefore to let the question of rent stand over until she saw her way a little better. So eventually it was settled, and there came a morning, early in October, when Muriel, with the tears in her eyes, had to stand at her own hall door and see the two

best and oldest friends she had in the world get into a cab and drive away from it, Mrs. Prettyman's kind face, and the stripes of Elizabeth's shawl appearing for a moment through the railings as the cab jogged slowly down the embankment ; then she turned back to take up life again under these new and changed conditions.

On the whole, the two that remained got on as well as any two people without a taste, or a thought, or a wish in common, could be expected to get on. Mrs. Skynner, as long as she had a good dinner and a comfortable room, enough society to enliven her days, and an occasional carriage to do her shoppings, had all that she required ; while Muriel felt tied and bound on every side by the pressure of a claim which alone would have kept her from expressing any discomfort she might feel. Not that I mean to insinuate that she was unhappy. Nothing of the sort. She

had her books, and her work, and as much independence as even she could desire; for all that, every day that passed more and more convinced her that all the charm and zest and happy joyous ease of the little home had departed for ever with the Prettymans. In one respect this loss was perhaps a gain, for she had certainly never worked so hard, or to such good purpose, as during the winter which followed their departure; embarking, amongst other things, on three or four pictures, larger, and of a more ambitious character than any she had yet attempted; one of which (the smallest, by the way, and the least ambitious) had the luck to be accepted by the Academy. Even her painting, however, had lost, she felt, no little of its relish, now that there was no longer any kind, prim Elizabeth Prettyman to share her studio, to laugh with, and to be occasionally laughed at, and to enter with the keenest

and warmest zest into every detail of her work. It may be imagined, therefore, the satisfaction with which she hailed the lengthening days; and taking advantage of a visit paid Mrs. Prettyman by her married daughter, laid violent hands upon Elizabeth and carried her off with her to Hampshire. Mrs. Skynner, of course, remained meanwhile in undisputed possession of the house in Cheyne Walk.

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH MISS ELLIS LOSES HER WAY.

THE day appointed for Muriel and Elizabeth to take possession of their new abode broke grey and unpromising. As she lay in bed in the morning, Muriel could hear the steady drip, drip of the rain upon the leads outside, while from the windows the little village below presented a truly forlorn appearance, its trim little street bedabbled with mud and starred with puddles reflecting the light of a dull grey sky. By eleven o'clock matters, however, had mended ; so, hastily donning a waterproof, she hurried out to make some purchases, the need of which had suddenly struck her.

By two the waggonette, specially ordered for the occasion, was at the door, and into it she and Elizabeth Prettyman duly packed themselves, all their multifarious parcels, including a couple of camp-stools, and a small mountain of baskets which Muriel had purchased that morning, fitting into the remaining spaces.

When they got into the green-margined lane leading to the cottage, the waggonette had to go at a foot's pace, the heavy clayey soil almost hindering the wheels from turning. Huge green branches extended on every side, sweeping right across the seats, and obliging them to cling tightly on to their sundry possessions, in order to hinder their being swept away. To Elizabeth there was something not a little portentous and even alarming about this unusual mode of approach. What sort of house could it be, she thought, thus hidden away out of sight and reach of all mortal ken?

Muriel, however, was in the highest spirits. Everything for her was delightful. The dripping trees ; the huge burdock leaves, which seemed offering their rain-filled platters to every passer-by ; the grey gossamers covering the grass with a delicate silvery mist-laden pattern ; the blue hazy distance which showed wherever the trees parted for an instant, and the fresh smell of the earth and flowers which rose as they brushed through the dripping herbage. Presently they reached an opening where three or four large trees lay on the ground. Here a small group of children, evidently on the alert, scuttled away at their approach. Another minute and the waggonette drew up at a wooden paling, overtopped by a line of privet, beyond which the tall brick chimneys and small dormer windows of a dwelling-house were to be seen.

As Muriel had announced, it was only a cottage, although a large one, its dark-

brown weather-beaten face looking out in friendly fashion from under the low wet eaves. The outbuildings were mostly of wood, once black, now grey, newer and darker patches here and there showing conspicuously against the old. A row of straw-covered "bee pots" stood on one side, with a mulberry tree and a laburnum, old, but still covered with blossom, upon the other. The front of the house itself was a mass of climbing cotoneaster, now somewhat ragged and dishevelled. The two sides, also, had apparently once been covered with creepers, judging by the nails which still bristled in all directions, but the latter had long since either died or been pulled away, and their supports were now chiefly utilized as pegs for the multifarious hoops, and stray bits of wire and whipcord which had accumulated in the service of the family. Before they had time to take in these details, however, they were them-

selves taken possession of by their landlady, who whirled them indoors, talking volubly all the time. Mrs. Partridge was a shrill little woman, with an ill-tempered nose, and a pair of beady black eyes—a Londoner, as she assured them before they had been five minutes in her company. The husband, who was presently ordered in from an outhouse to help in the carrying up the luggage, was a big, meek, heavy-footed man, who, if he had ever been a soldier, had long since forgotten all soldierliness of bearing. That night our adventurous friends dined chiefly on eggs and water-cresses, Muriel amongst her other purchases having entirely forgotten the necessity of providing something for their dinner. This, however, was voted a trifle. The house was as clean as soap and water could make it; the beds were fresh and good; a delicious scent of lilacs and wall-flowers came stealing in.

from the little garden, and the two ladies retired to rest in high satisfaction with their new surroundings.

Next morning broke bright and clear, and Muriel, who had been wandering about from an early hour, would hardly wait for breakfast to be over before carrying Elizabeth off to inspect the site selected for her first sketch. Crossing the road they passed through a thin fringe of forest, following the course of a wooden paling, until they came to a place where the ground suddenly fell away; a smooth slope dotted with trees leading to a small moor, or heathery expanse, through the middle of which a narrow ribbon of water could be seen slowly meandering. This central space of course was clear, but all around the forest ranks closed thickly, one big line of patriarchal oaks standing out along the very edge of the declivity, their great grey trunks and pale yellowish

foliage telling well against the deeper duller greens behind. Here the two artists wandered about for a while till they had hit upon what they considered the exact spot for a sketch ; after which, the younger of the two settled herself down to her easel, and Elizabeth Prettyman proposed returning for a time to the cottage, if Muriel "didn't mind being left." No, Muriel didn't at all mind—in fact, rather preferred it ; there being moments—and the beginning of a sketch is one—when the society of even the dearest of friends can be dispensed with without a sigh.

Elizabeth once gone, she soon settled down steadily to her work. It was marvellously still here upon the edge of the forest. All around the big trees flung their capacious shadows, a few thin zigzag threads of light alone finding their way to her canvas. Below, however, the whole expanse was flooded with

sunshine, which seemed penetrating every sod of turf, and finding its way to every pebble at the bottom of the little stream. Upon the further side of the fence, a great pine-tree was scattering its wealth of pollen, filling the whole air with the finest gold-dust. Occasionally a squirrel scampered past, or a woodpecker would utter its sharp "Ha! Ha!" as it dug its beak deep into the chinks in search of grubs. Once, too, Muriel heard a sound of munching, not many yards away, and looking up saw that a young heifer had stolen close up to her unperceived. Another time it was a hare which came lopping lazily by, and sat for an instant on its haunches to stare at her, before dashing wildly away down the ride. She worked rapidly on, getting in the general effect, and trying to give the peculiar glow of the foreground, set off as it was by the cool greens and greys beyond.

The result, however, by no means satisfied her. For one thing, the light was unsatisfactory; too broadly diffused in one part, and too wholly withdrawn from another, and, though by no means a tyro, Muriel was too little of a landscape painter to know how to adapt these conditions to her liking. Altogether she was in a state of considerable despondency, fast verging upon despair, when the rustle of Elizabeth's dress was heard coming back to her through the wood.

"Oh, such a hideous hideous failure, Elizabeth, as I'm making of it!" she exclaimed, as her friend drew near.

"Are you, dear? That's something quite new for you, Muriel. Let me see. Now really, I do not at all agree with you; I think you've done wonders—for the time, that is. What is there so wrong?"

"Wrong? Oh, everything is wrong:

trees and sky, lights and shadows, distance and foreground, everything. Never mind. I'll give it up and begin another, or rather, I'll give it up altogether for the present, and go off and buy our mutton—perhaps that will inspire me.”

“Mutton?” repeated Miss Prettyman, in a tone of bewilderment.

“Yes. Don't you know I forgot to order it yesterday, and that if it's not ordered to-day we shall have to dine again on water-cresses, and then what shall I say to Mrs. Prettyman when I take you back to her, a pale and emaciated-looking wreck?”

Miss Prettyman looked grave. “I never know whether you're joking or not, Muriel,” she said; “but I hope you would not really be so silly as to give up your painting in order to get mutton for me?”

“Well, I don't suppose that a diet exclusively of water-cresses is likely to suit

either of us. Besides, you must remember we have our credit to keep up in Mrs. Partridge's eyes. I'm not sure that she doesn't already suspect us of belonging to some sect of vegetarians or antinomians ; at least, it is the only way I can account for the severity of her glances. And then there is my own character as housekeeper ; that, too, is at stake, recollect."

"But even if it must be got, why not send some one else ? It is such an enormous distance for you to go yourself."

"Not by the short cut. I came back that way last time. Mr. Partridge showed it me, and I shall know it again, I feel sure. Besides, I want a walk, Elizabeth ; I really do."

Miss Prettyman shook her head despondently. "I don't like it at all, Muriel ; I don't, indeed. You are a great deal too handsome to go wandering about in this sort of way by yourself. I don't mind

saying it to you, because of course you know it, and, besides, you're not vain ; but it really is not the thing to do. Nobody does it—no lady, at least."

" But, my dear Elizabeth, I am an artist, and artists cannot be bound by these ridiculous conventional rules. I should die if I had to be always thinking of the proprieties."

" I don't see that, Muriel. I am an artist too, and I hope I have never violated propriety, or even *wished* to do so ; besides, at my age it is different. But I particularly wish you would not go to-day. I know that you will lose your way, or that something will happen ; I have a feeling."

Muriel, however, only laughed. She had by this time gathered up her various possessions, and turned back towards the cottage ; where, after some preliminary instructions from the Partridge family, she

started off again down the green track, glancing back as she did so to nod a friendly farewell to the faithful Elizabeth, who stood disconsolately looking after her, and then, turning to the right, plunged into the forest.

It was a delicious day. The glamour of the springtime was upon everything ; upon the grass and heather ; upon the tufts of anemones and primroses which still lingered in shady places ; upon the great trees spreading wide arms protectingly over a whole world of delicate lesser beings—a sort of gentle riotousness, which seemed to diffuse itself over everything, and to course magnetically through her own veins. In spite of the rain the ground was not really wet, the grey tufted lichens and withered bracken keeping it all crisp and dry. Small brown butterflies flitted down the ride before her, or alighted on the fresh bramble shoots, where their pale green

undersides rendered them straightway invisible. Then, with a sudden turn to the left, Muriel came to a hollow place where a great oak tree stood up gaunt and dead—the only withered thing in all that world of life. After this she left the region of the big trees behind her for a while, and came to a part of the wood where the ground was covered with a dense growth of young birch and maple, their new green livery contrasting with the worn-out hollies and big old “ivy tods” which dotted the clearer spaces. Here the path again turned suddenly away to the left, and Muriel began to misdoubt her somewhat of her way. As far as her recollection served, there had been none of these sudden twists and turns upon the previous occasion. She was now coming, however, she saw, to a clearer part of the forest, so thought it as well to push on steadily, and hope for the best. Soon

she was climbing a low brush-covered hill, and could presently see beyond another and a higher ridge crowned with huge dark pines, the sides and valley below sprinkled thickly over with upstart larches—like pigmies marching, she thought, to the assault of giants. Beyond this, again, were more green sweeps of forest, and more hill and dale; but, look where she would, not the sign of a house or anything like a landmark, and she began to bethink her with a little less scorn of poor Elizabeth's predictions. Apparently it was *not* so utterly impossible for people to lose themselves in the forest! Presently, oh! joyful sound, the faint, distant tinkling of a bell came to her over the tops of the trees, and she hastened her steps in that direction. Where there was a bell there must be houses, and where there were houses at least she thought she would be able to inquire her way. A tiny path,

debouching off the wider one, appeared to lead directly in the direction of the sound, and accordingly she turned aside to follow it. Evidently it was not much used, for big, woolly-looking mulleins and long straggling vetchlings, stretched across, catching against her dress at every step. The path led her a long way, becoming narrower and narrower as it went on; the trees, too, closed thickly in upon her again, their big roots tripping her up, and their branches entangling themselves in her hair. Altogether she was fast losing hope and patience, and was just upon the point of turning back, when she caught sight of a paling; not the usual bark-covered kind, but a trim, sophisticated affair of iron and wire, enclosing a small expanse of smooth green sward. Up to this the path led, and on again upon the further side. There was not a symptom of a gate, so she scrambled

lightly over, and—suddenly found herself in a churchyard.

She looked round. It was a pretty, peaceful looking little spot—a small clearing won from the forest, which still hemmed it in on three sides, the great branches of beech and sycamore stretching far out over the low green graves. Below—invisible till the present moment—stood a small church, or rather chapel, grey, but by no means venerable, its smart little gables and pinnacles glittering like confectionery in the sunshine, and beyond that again, a long line of cottages, whitening the slow green rise of the slope.

It was all quite new to Muriel, and proved incontestably that she had lost her way; still it was a comfort to her to be out of the forest, and to see again signs of habitation, so she hastened on down the little path track which led direct to the

church, skirting on her way a number of small green graves, dotted over with daisies and large yellow buttercups, which struck against her feet, and left a rim of pale gold upon her dress. The bell had long since ceased ringing; but as she paused before the porch the sound of a voice reached her from within. Muriel felt both hot and tired after her long walk, and the dark porch, with its deep seat, looked eminently inviting; so, intending only to stay for a minute, she went in, and seated herself in a corner.

A big brown curtain hung before the doorway, swaying gently to and fro in the light breeze. Presently this was pushed aside, and an old woman—evidently the pew-opener—appeared at the entrance, and beckoned to her to come in. She shook her head, but the old lady would take no denial. “Do ee cum in then. There’s room fur a maäny more,” she

said, in true south-country drawl, holding the curtain widely open as she spoke.

Muriel felt caught. She infinitely preferred the seclusion of her present asylum, but already a few heads were turning in her direction, and it would probably entail disturbing the whole congregation if she persisted in her refusal. She got up, therefore, and followed her guide, seating herself in the first unoccupied seat she met with.

It was the tiniest of tiny chapels, and at first appeared to her absolutely dark; the thick greenish glass of the side windows hardly admitting a ray of light. Gradually, however, as her eyes got accustomed to the obscurity, she could distinguish the figures of the small, sparsely scattered congregation—all villagers of the poorest and humblest type. From a rose window in the east end a long, narrow shaft of vari-coloured light fell across the

was not a sermon, or hardly one : only a few words of exhortation, short, practical, and eminently to the point, delivered in a round, full, somewhat unmodulated voice ; but to Muriel its very practicality seemed just then its principal defect. It was all over, however, almost before she had collected her thoughts, or clearly begun to take in its purport, and then the young man came back to the steps to deliver the blessing. Suddenly she recognized him. It was the same man she had seen a few days before in the dog-cart. Either this unromantic reminder, or something more immediately pertinent to the moment jarred upon her, for it was with the sort of irritation which follows the sudden breaking of a train of thought that she followed the little rustic flock back again into the sunshine.

She was well in the middle of the village before she recollected her errand ;

then she turned to one of the cottages, and inquired the way to S——.

A girl, who was holding a baby at the door, stared at her at first without answering; then, when the question was repeated, said she would call her missus.

The missus came—a clean, pleasant-faced old woman, in a short, brown gown, a blue stuff petticoat, and the inevitable black poke bonnet. She, too, seemed amazed at the question. “Why, it do be a twerriable way off, surely; eight moile or more, I’m sure. Ee doan’t ever mean that ’ee’s going to walk thereaway to-day, do ’ee, miss?”

“Eight miles, is it really? No, then I’m afraid I hardly could walk. I must get a carriage. Where shall I find one, can you tell me?”

“Cawriage, miss! Lord love ’ee, there ain’t no cawriages here—n’er a one. Th’ old paäson he had one, but he’s gone

away this good bit, so a be, and the young paäson he goes 'a foot, loike the rest o' we, so a do."

Muriel looked blank. "But surely there must be *something* I can get to take me home?" she said.

"Well, miss, if so be as my maister was t'home, may be he'd get 'ee one from Timothy Rose, oop at th' Angel yonder, what has a little shay that he lets out whiles in the sommer time, when the volks come here in the forest—pleasuring loike. But I'm much afeard as ye'd never find 'ee own way. 'Tis a twerriable crook'd way from here, so a be—twerriable."

"Perhaps I could get some one to show it me though," Muriel said, feeling that, after her experience of the morning, it would certainly be as well not to adventure too much on her own organs of locality. "I would pay them, you know," she added eagerly.

"Well, do 'ee know now, I doan't so much moind if I go wi' 'ee myself, least-ways as far as the toap of Caraway hill. Once 'ee pass the Pook's padock 'ee can't go so very far wrong, and I'll taäke my maister his dinner wi' me, so a will. He'll be none sorry to get it, and a drop o' the cider beer too. He's a wonderful man for his cider is my maister, so sit 'ee down, and I woänt keep 'ee a minute."

They set off presently, the old woman carrying her husband's dinner, wrapped in a pocket-handkerchief. Just as they were leaving the village, they were overtaken by the young clergyman, who, with a nod to Muriel's companion, and a slight glance at herself, passed them by, his long legs carrying him quickly out of sight.

"A be an oncommon nice young gentleman for a paäson, so a be, and twerriable good to the poør," the old woman said

approvingly, as she looked after him. "I shouldn't be sorry mysel if t'old one worn't never to cum back no more, so I shouldn't."

"Is he the curate?" Muriel asked.

"Nay, nay, he's na cewrate. He's only here while th' old man's away. He comes from Lun'on. I hear say as his feyther's a wonderful rich man up north somewhere, and mortial angry wi' this un for turnin paäson; but there, a body can't tell. There be so maäny lies about nowadays, so there be."

They had by this time got into a narrow lane, with a wall on one side and a ditch full of nettles on the other; after leaving which, they crossed a number of small fields, the path meandering about in a highly surprising manner through a succession of stiles, each one narrower than the last, until at length they came to the top of a little hill commanding a wide view

over the green billowy sweeps of forest
Here the old woman paused.

"There be the Angel now, right i' front
of ye. Be sure 'ee tell Timothy I sent 'ee,
or maybe he'll not giv' 'ee the shay. 'Ee
thinks 'ee'll know the way back, doaänt
'ee?,"

"Yes, I suppose so," Muriel said, glancing
back rather apprehensively along the
way they had come. Then she put her
hand in her pocket, and—suddenly discovered
that she had come out without her
purse. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she said,
blushing. "I find I've no money. But,
if you'll kindly give me your name, the
carriage will have to come back, and I will
send it to you in an envelope."

"Lord love 'ee, miss, doan't 'ee mind.
'Ee cum and see me again some day,
and I'll give 'ee an apple turnover. I's
twerriable good for turnovers, I is. But I
mun be goin' now, or my maister will be

rampolling mad if he doänt get his dinner ; so I'll wish 'ee good day, and doän't 'ee forget to tell Timothy Rose I sent 'ee."

They parted with much mutual good will, and Muriel hastened on to the Angel—a dreary-looking little public house, standing at an angle where two ways met. In spite of the recommendation she brought with her, no chaise, however, was to be had. A gentleman—a friend of the clergyman's—had taken it, the landlord said, to Frithham, but if she would go to Mrs. Pottle's, the pew-opener's, where the two gentlemen lodged, maybe he would be back, and she could have it then. This certainly did not sound promising, still there appeared nothing else to be done. So, thanking the man, Muriel turned rather disconsolately back again to the village. As she was crossing the last stile into the lane, she looked at her watch, and found, with some dismay, that it was

already four o'clock; if, after all, she failed to secure the gig, there would be nothing for it, she thought, but to retrace her steps through that long, tedious stretch of forest again. She was just congratulating herself on having, at all events, got safely back so far, when, turning a corner, she suddenly saw two men, standing with their backs to her, in the middle of the road.

They were about as ill-conditioned a looking pair as could well be seen, with tramp and loafer written in every line of their slouching figures, and every inch of their greasy clothes, and, with a sudden feeling of alarm, Muriel quickened her steps, hoping to be able to get by unmolested.

But it soon became evident that the men had no intention whatever of letting her get by. "I say, 'Enery, wot's the time?" one man said to the other in an ostentatiously loud tone as she approached.

"Can't say, 'Arry, cos why, my watch is gone to the maker's, but 'ere's this 'ere young lady, who's a follerin' us, she'll 'ave the time; 'aven't you, miss?" turning round, with a grin, upon poor Muriel.

Still she tried to pass, but the fellow thrust himself right in her way.

"Can't yer tell a pore man the time, miss?" he said threateningly.

She stopped, and looked him full in the face. "If you really want to know the time, you'll see the church clock at the next corner," she answered, and again made an effort to get by.

"Church clock be blowed! I ain't a goin' by no church clock," he retorted sullenly. "You just 'and me that 'ere watch of yourn, miss, or it'll be the wuz for you."

"I say, 'Enery, let the lady be," the other man said jocosely.

"Why didn't she show me 'er watch at

fust then? Hi aint a going to stand no imperence, lady or no lady. If she'd 'ave been civil to hi, hi'd 'ave been civil to 'er, but now she shall just 'and me that there watch afore hever I lets 'er by."

Muriel was no coward, but the situation, it must be owned, was an uncomfortable one. She thought of turning and trying to escape down the lane; but for one thing, she had not a notion where it led to; for another, what would be easier than for the men to follow and capture her? As for giving up her watch—a watch that had belonged both to her father and to John—that was about the last thing she thought of. She simply stood still, therefore, with her back against the wall, her eyes full upon her assailants, and her mind busily running over the chances of a rescue.

"Air you a goin' for to give me that 'ere

watch, or must hi cum and take it?" the fellow repeated sullenly.

"I shall certainly not give you my watch," she answered haughtily; "and, if you attempt to take it, I shall call for help. There are plenty of people within reach who will hear me," she added, with considerably more confidence, however, it must be owned, than she really felt.

"Oh, air there, miss? his that all you knows. Reckon my mate and me we knows this blooming old wood a long sight afore hever you did. Why yer might screech yer 'art out 'ere, and ne'er a one 'ere ye. So, as hi should be werry sorry to hincommode you, all hi says is, 'and me that 'ere watch, and no more about it, else——" And the fellow advanced threateningly.

"Keep back!" Muriel exclaimed, her self-possession giving way for the moment to sudden panic. "You'll help me, won't

you?" she cried, turning imploringly to the other man, who still hung somewhat in the rear.

"A fellar can't go agin 'is pardner, miss; but if so be as yer 'ave a five pun' note 'andy, why then I won't let 'im touch yer."

"But I have no money at all with me," she cried despairingly.

"Then 'ere for yer watch, and no more about it," cried the other, making a snatch at the chain, which showed outside her jacket.

"Help! help!" Muriel shouted at the top of her voice, thrusting the man's hands back at the same time with her parasol.

The fellow yelled a curse. "Darn you, 'Arry, can't yer help a cove?" he called to his companion. "'Old 'er 'ands, will yer? Darn 'er!"

"Help! help!" Muriel shouted again, looking wildly round at the empty fields

and silent hedgerows, where some impassive-looking cows and a few crows flying low over the trees seemed to be the only live things visible.

But help was nearer than she thought. There came a sudden sound of steps along the lane; then a pause; then another forward rush, and, almost before she had time to distinguish her deliverer, the foremost ruffian was sprawling on his back amongst the nettles, while the other, discreetly taking to his heels, leaped the wall, and fled away over the field. Then the new comer turned to her.

“You’re not hurt, are you?” he asked in a quick, abrupt voice—the same voice she had heard in church.

“Hurt? Oh, no; but my watch— Ah, here it is!” picking it up where it had got thrown in the scuffle. Then she turned round to her defender. “Thank you a thousand times. I would not have

lost it for the world!" she cried gratefully.

Her champion—a big, broad-shouldered young man, apparently between twenty and thirty—seemed anything but particularly gratified by the commendation. "It would be a pity you should lose your watch, but it is worse to know that there are such brutes as that about the place," he said, indicating the gentleman in the nettles. "He doesn't belong to the parish, however, that's one comfort."

Muriel could not help smiling. "I don't know that that would have made any particular difference to me," she said.

"It would to me—while I've charge of it, at any rate. My name is Stephen Halliday. How far have you got to go this evening?"

Muriel felt a good deal relieved by the quick abrupt manners of her new friend, which seemed to simplify what would

otherwise have been a decidedly embarrassing encounter. She briefly related her adventures therefore, explaining how her coming there at all that afternoon had originated in the first instance in an accident.

"Yes, I think I saw you coming into church," he said, a gleam of amusement for a moment crossing his face. "And now you want, of course, to get back. The first thing, however, is about this fellow. By rights, you know, I ought to take him, and hand him over to the police."

"Oh no, pray don't. *Pray* leave him where he is," Muriel said earnestly. "He has not got my watch, and that is the chief thing. I don't want to prosecute him. I don't, indeed."

The young clergyman paused as if in doubt. "You hear what the lady says, sir?" he said, wheeling suddenly round

upon his antagonist, who still lay prone in the ditch. "It's useless, I suppose, trying to exact a promise from you, but at least you can understand that this style of behaviour is likely to lead to the gallows."

The individual thus addressed, lifted himself on his elbow, rubbing his head at the same time with his disengaged hand. "That'll do, parson," he said sullenly. "I've had quite enough of your fists this afternoon, thank ye, without 'aving none of your jaw."

Muriel thought her new friend looked a trifle discomposed at this sally. He said nothing, however, merely picked up his umbrella, which had fallen into the mud, and walked down the path beside her, leaving the occupant in the nettle bed to decamp at his leisure. Now that the excitement was over she was beginning to feel the effects of it all. Her long fast,

too—for she had eaten nothing since breakfast—was beginning to tell on her, and she felt hardly able to walk.

Evidently her companion was a man of quick eyes, for he soon perceived her exhaustion. “You’re not ill, are you?” he said.

“No, not ill,” she answered rather faintly. “I’m a little tired, I suppose, that’s all.”

“Take my arm.”

Muriel took it. At another time she might have hesitated, or been struck at all events by the oddity, not to say the supreme ridiculousness, of the whole situation, but just now it seemed to her the most natural thing in the world; indeed, anything more purely official than the young man’s whole manner it would be difficult to imagine.

“Are you hungry? Have you had any luncheon?” was the next question.

In spite of herself she could not help smiling. "I believe I am rather hungry," she answered meekly. "Never mind though; I shall have dinner as soon as I get back, so pray don't trouble to get me anything."

He made no answer, and they walked on in silence till they came to a cottage at the end of the lane. Here he paused.

"Sit down, please," he said, pointing to a bench, and before Muriel had time to realize his intention he had disappeared into the house, and was back again with a cup of milk in one hand and a large cottage loaf in the other.

"Oh, but indeed, indeed I can't eat it. I really can't!" she exclaimed. "The truth is, I have no money with me to pay for anything—not a single penny."

He laughed. "I think Mrs. Short will trust me with the price of a loaf," he said. "Why, I used to lodge here

when I first came to the parish. I'm only sorry that there doesn't seem any butter forthcoming."

He was cutting slices with a rapidity which seemed to denote considerable practice, and now gravely handed her one upon the point of the knife. Muriel took it, feeling herself reduced to the level of the smallest of small school-children as she did so. If Elizabeth Prettyman, she thought, could only see her now! What a humiliating ending to all her boasted independence!

When she had at length drunk as much milk, and eaten as many slices of bread as her companion could induce her to swallow, they again set out. Though no longer hungry, Muriel felt desperately tired. It was as much as she could do to drag one foot after the other, and she was just beginning to think with renewed dismay of that long trudge through the wood,

when they reached the last turn leading to the village.

Ahead of them a dog-cart containing two occupants was seen moving slowly up the incline, at sight of which her companion gave a sudden shout. "Don't hurry yourself; take your time; I'll bring it back to you," he said, and, so saying, shot away up the slope.

Muriel, toiling slowly after, saw the dog-cart stop to allow her new friend to overtake it. Then, after a short parley, one of the occupants was turned out on the road; Mr. Halliday took his place; the dog-cart was turned round, and presently drew up beside her. Then he got out and gravely handed her in.

"You'll say where you want to be taken to," he said, still rather breathless from his run.

"Yes, I will, thank you," she answered. "But I don't know what to say to *you*,

Mr. Halliday," she added gratefully. "You've done too much for me. I can't even try to thank you."

He frowned again. Evidently he was not a very good-tempered young man. "Don't then," he said shortly. "As for doing, it's all in the course of the day's work." And, slightly lifting his hat, he turned brusquely away up the road.

Muriel, as she leaned back against the well-worn cushion of her chaise, felt not a little perplexed and confused by the various and bewilderingly exciting events of her day. She was thankful, of course, to have got so well out of her last unpleasant adventure; doubly thankful to be speeding safely on her homeward road, but both her dignity and her belief in her own absolute independence had received too many rough knocks that afternoon for her to feel exactly easy or comfortable. How supremely ridiculous she must seem to

that man, she thought—an idiot, with only just sense enough to give trouble and get herself into foolish predicaments. And then again, what *was* she to say to Elizabeth Prettyman? What an endless, interminable, immeasurable source of triumph the whole affair would be to her!

CHAPTER V.

AN APOSTLE OF WORK.

MR. HALLIDAY had nearly reached the top of the slope again when he was met by a short gentleman, in a light grey suit of clothes and a smart red tie, who got up from the wall on which he was sitting and came sauntering towards him, his hands plunged deep in his pockets.

"Was that a parishioner of yours, may I inquire?" he asked.

The other stopped. "I can't say, I'm sure," he said. "I should have to look in the map. She's staying somewhere out towards Ringwood, she told me, and got here through the forest."

"Drawn by the magic of your preaching?"

"Drawn by the crookedness of the paths, probably. She did come to church, by the way, but I fancy it was against her will. I saw a struggle going on between her and Mrs. Pottles in the porch."

"Hem. She struck me as handsome. You, perhaps, didn't remark it?"

"Yes, I thought her good-looking."

"That is a concession. What is her name, by the way?"

"I haven't a notion."

"You don't know? You mean that you know nothing at all about her?"

"Nothing. I never saw her in my life, that I'm aware of, till this afternoon."

"Well, then, my dear Stephen, although a remarkably patient man, and although well aware that beauty and such-like foolish charms have no sort of effect upon you, still I *should* like—merely as a matter of

curiosity — to know what claims this particular young lady may have had, that I should have been turned out into the middle of the road like a sack of mouldy potatoes, merely that she might have my chaise ?”

“ Claims ! What on earth do you mean by claims, Roger ? ”

“ What had she done ? ”

“ She had done nothing. She was tired, and hungry, and frightened, and in a hurry to get home ; that was all.”

“ Frightened ? Who had frightened her ? Had you ? ”

“ Not I.”

“ What then ? Did the cows run after her, and did you interpose ? ”

Halliday laughed. “ Worse than that,” he said.

“ Then old Mrs. Tomkin’s goat must have tried to butt her ? ”

“ Worse still.”

"Then I give up. I was not aware you boasted so many perils."

"She was set upon by tramps—as ugly a looking pair of scoundrels as ever you saw in your life."

The man in grey gave a prolonged whistle.

"Delightful!" he exclaimed; "I see it all now—fair unknown escaping down the road pursued by ruffians meets the Reverend Stephen engaged in his parochial duties. He flings himself upon the pursuers. They fight three hours by Salisbury clock—fearful blows given and received. Final success of virtue, who walks off triumphantly with the prize."

Halliday laughed again. "Your imagination deceives you, my friend," he said. "So far from running away, the young lady was not thinking of escaping at all. On the contrary she was standing her ground and defending herself gallantly."

"Defending herself? What with?"

"With a green silk parasol."

"Well, and at your appearance the two ruffians left her and attacked you. Was that it?"

"Nothing of the sort. One ran away across the fields, and the other dropped into the ditch almost before I had time to touch him."

"I detect a ring of regret there. You would have preferred a longer struggle."

"Well, I own I should have thought less badly of the fellow if he had stood out a little longer," the young clergyman answered modestly.

"And so given you an opportunity of expending some of that superfluous energy of yours? I dare say you would, and I dare say he, poor devil, thought he had quite enough of it as it was. By the way, I perceive virtue has not come off wholly scot free. Look at the back of your hand."

Mr. Halliday glanced down. "Yes, I've rubbed it a bit, I know," he said carelessly. "I suppose I shall have to go in and look for some sticking-plaster; I shall just have time before I start off for Mrs. Huckaback's."

"And who, if I might inquire, is Mrs. Huckaback?"

"The cobbler's mother. She's bed-ridden, and I promised to see her this afternoon."

"And after that? What comes next?"

"Oh, well, after that there's only the evening class, and that young Simcox; I'm cramming him for his examination; he wants to get into the excise."

"The deuce he does! And in the meantime, here am I, Roger Hyde, your *fidus Achates*, come down at great inconvenience to myself, and at your invitation—mark me, at *your* invitation—and this is the way I'm treated. Every tinker and

tailor—I beg pardon, there are no tailors—but every tinker and cobbler's mother in the place is run after, and I am left kicking my heels and pottering about this interminable old wood, without so much as a soul to speak to.”

Halliday looked penitent. “ Really I’m very sorry, Roger, old man,” he said, “ upon my word I am ; but how can I help it ? You see these engagements were all made before you arrived. Besides, they’re all part of my duty—what I undertook to do when I came to the place.”

“ Duty ! Now do you suppose that that worthy old gentleman whose respectable shoes you are filling, goes through all these performances ? ”

“ Yes, I suppose so—more or less.”

“ A good deal of the less I should say. I pity that poor old man from my soul, I do. I can’t conceive a more deplorable position than his when he comes back and

finds all the things he's expected to do—play cricket with one set of his parishioners—teach geography and arithmetic to another—get up at six in the morning to have service for a third; and be general odd boy and man of all work to the rest; and all because in an unwary moment he made over his flock to a restless, uncomfortable, long-legged fanatic, who, because he can't be at peace himself, is bent upon not allowing any one else to be at peace either.

Halliday laughed. "Look here, you dissatisfied old man," he said, "if I promise to take a whole holiday on Saturday, and go off with you then wherever you choose, will that do?"

"I shall have returned to London, thank you, before Saturday."

"Nonsense, Roger. You promised me to stay a week."

"I did not know then how I was to be entertained."

"Come, be reasonable. What can I do to satisfy you?"

The gentleman in grey appeared to meditate.

"Take me to see your young lady—the heroine of the tramp episode," he said at last. "It is the least, I am sure, you can do after the cavalierly way you both treated me."

"But, my dear Roger, I tell you I don't know her."

"Not after saving her life—or her purse, at any rate? What better introduction could you have?"

"All the more reason for keeping away from her."

"I thought parsons were bound to visit all their parishioners?"

"But, I tell you, I don't even know that she is my parishioner."

"Well, find out and take me there."

Halliday frowned. "Nonsense, Roger,"

he said curtly. "What on earth can you want to see her for?"

"That's my affair."

"Well, I can't take you, then—that's all. Don't you see that it would be extremely bad taste? It would look as if I wanted the poor girl to thank me."

"You won't?"

"No."

"Very well then; I shall go and find her out for myself."

"All right, do." And here the colloquy broke off, Halliday striding away at his usual headlong pace to his lodgings, Hyde following more leisurely in the same direction.

They were old friends, these two young men. The friendship, begun a dozen years before at Eton, had been kept up at Oxford, and had continued ever since. Roger Hyde was some three or four years older than his friend, and a good cen-

tury or so, on his own showing, in experience and knowledge of the world. On leaving Oxford he had betaken himself to the bar, where he was supposed to be pushing his way with rather more celerity than is usual at that most dilatory of professions, when—unfortunately, so Halliday and several of his friends asserted—he succeeded to a fortune—nothing very tremendous, some two to three thousands a year at most, which had come in unexpectedly from a distant cousin. From that hour he had begun, they declared, to loafe, had continued to loafe ever since, and would never do anything but loafe again. He was, however, decidedly a clever man, and if he loafed, his loafing had, at all events, more purpose and meaning in it than the serious business of many a duller mortal. He dabbled a little in science and in more than one art; had bachelor quarters in London, where he received

his friends, and gave remarkably choice little dinners; and though he was by way of utterly scorning the æsthetic ones, and all their thoughts and ways and works, he was not, a bit more than they were, above the joys of collectorship, any more than he was above revelling in all those semi-artistic, semi-intellectual follies, which constitute the business of so many idle people, and the perplexity of so many busy ones. What the link was that bound two such utterly dissimilar men together, it would be difficult perhaps to say. Halliday was nothing if not in earnest, whereas Roger Hyde regarded life chiefly from a sort of spectatorly point of view, and if too good-natured to be exactly cynical, was certainly too easy-going to be very actively benevolent. For all that, the two had something very like a genuine affection for one another. Hyde liked Halliday better than any of the men with whom he more

commonly associated, while Halliday knew that under all the other's affectations and dilettantisms there lurked—some way down, it is true—a good sound core of solid sense and right-heartedness.

As he walked back to his lodging he was going through a good deal of, perhaps unnecessary, self-reproach, for not having made better arrangements for keeping the days Roger were to spend with him free. Of course he could have done so, he said to himself, if he had had the sense to give the matter a little previous consideration. And then, again, the other's half-joking remark about old Mr. Bellenden—the rector whose *locum tenens* he was—rankled rather within him. Perhaps it *was* true that that worthy man—who was sixty-two, and a martyr to gout—would find his own parish a somewhat uneasy post when he returned to it, after the departure of his younger and more energetic substitute.

Halliday's own coming had originated in the first place in an accident. A friend of his, a London curate, who had undertaken the post, had suddenly fallen ill, and he had volunteered to fill his place. At the time he had understood it to be only a matter of a few weeks ; but since then the rector in his turn had fallen ill abroad, and there seemed no immediate prospect of his being relieved. He chafed a good deal under this enforced arrangement. Not but what he liked the place—as who, indeed, would not?—but he was too young and restless really to appreciate it as another and an older man might have done. He was, moreover, endowed with an inordinate appetite for work, and it was quite true that if no work was naturally forthcoming, he would be perfectly certain to set to work and create it for himself. That this passion for work originated wholly in

religious zeal, or ardent and heroic devotion to duty, I for one am by no means prepared to say. On the contrary, I suspect that it would have required just as much heroism for this young man to have abstained from doing, as for another man to have girded himself up to the task. There were circumstances, too, in his antecedents which made anything like inaction more distinctly a reproach to him than it would to another. The village version of those antecedents had been less incorrect than such versions usually are. It was true that Halliday was the son of a north-country millionaire, and true, moreover, that he and his father had quarrelled, though not true that that quarrel had originated in the son's determination to go into the Church, since, as a matter of fact, it had taken place some time before that determination had occurred even to the young man's own mind.

James Halliday, the father, was a man of what is called an unblemished business reputation; a sensible, clear-headed, upright man, and by no means a vulgar one either. He had made his own way, and cared not a jot who knew it, or who was acquainted, moreover, with the fact that his own father had, once upon a time, been no better than a common factory worker. For all that, deep down in his heart of hearts lurked the parvenu's wish for social success—not for himself, indeed, but for his son. His ambition in this respect was perfectly simple and well defined. He had no desire to see Stephen a Prime Minister or a Lord Chancellor—even had such ambitions as these been within the bounds of possibility. All he wished was to see him cut what would be called a “figure” in the world; be one, in short, of the glittering youth of the day, only better gilt, and with a youth more resplendent than

the rest. Why not? The boy, on one side, at least, was as well born as any man in England, and if his father had the money to pay for his glittering, why should he not glitter? why not take the place to which his birth entitled him, and ruffle it with the best in the land? Unfortunately for his wishes, this was precisely the one thing which young Mr. Halliday peremptorily declined to do. He did not mind—in fact, he declared, he should rather like, being a blacksmith, or a bricklayer, a tinker, a sailor, or a soldier—so long, by the way, as the last wasn't a guardsman—or he would enter his father's mill, or he would emigrate. In short, he would do anything—anything, that is, but the one thing that he was particularly wanted to do. That there might be something to be said for his side of the question may perhaps be admitted, but that he might have brought it forward with less

vehemence, and a less lofty and scornful superiority, is, unfortunately, undeniable. At all events, he and his father had there-upon parted, with fierce anger on both sides, an anger which, on the latter's part, burned only the deeper and the longer for the fact that this son, who had scorned his aspirations and thwarted his wishes, had hitherto been of all his children the one he himself cared for most.

In his youth James Halliday had married a wife very many years older than himself—a rich, vulgar woman, who had borne him two sons and died, leaving him a by no means inconsolable widower. Years afterwards, when the fortune, then in process of making, was already made, and when he himself was a man well over fifty, Mr. Halliday married again. His second wife was the daughter of a Norfolk baronet, a fair, frightened, fragile-looking woman, who had passed twenty-seven years

in unqualified submission to the will of an imperious mother, and was by most people considered to have lost all her beauty and most of her wits in the process. "Of course driven into it against her will, poor thing!" the experienced reader will say; but, as a matter of fact, it was nothing of the sort. What Miss Beachamp could have seen to attract or even to reassure her in the cold-mannered, grey-headed capitalist, of whom even his own relatives stood in awe, it would be difficult to say. Perhaps, like other serfs, she thought even a change of despots a gain; perhaps she was simply weary of her present life; at all events, it is certain that she went into it entirely of her own accord, nay, even to some extent against the wishes of her relations, who, as it happened, were bigots upon the subject of birth, and by no means flattered by the alliance, despite the undeniably solid recommendations of the bride-

groom. How she mustered up courage to do the deed no one ever knew ; but one thing is at all events certain, and that is that she never repented of it. If not exactly an adoring husband, James Halliday was always kind, and even, so far as his nature enabled him to be, tender ; and when, some eight or nine years later, the poor thing died, leaving only one child, Stephen, then a boy of four years old, the husband's grief, if not demonstrative, was at all events deep and lasting

This boy he was determined should be brought up in a different fashion from the rest of the family. His other sons were already settled in his own business ; that was enough ; Stephen should not be a manufacturer. What he was to be was, however, less clear. In his own person James Halliday had no experience of that glittering world into which it was his

ambition to launch his son ; indeed, in its remoteness from all his own interests and pre-occupations lay probably the real root and secret of its attraction for him. He was not a man given to consulting others as a rule ; still, on this occasion he did consult a friend—a certain retired colonel, whom he had come to regard as a fixed and final referee upon all the more difficult and delicate social problems. That friend, after due deliberation, advised that a commission in the Guards should be secured, and accordingly interest was made to have Stephen's name put down for one. This, however, was to be only a preliminary. For years James Halliday had been putting together a very considerable sum of money, which sum it was his intention to invest in an estate, and the estate thus acquired was to be settled upon Stephen. In this there was nothing, he considered, that could be called unjust.

His two other sons were both well provided for. Not only had they their mother's fortune, but the whole of his own large business connection would in due time be theirs. Stephen's lot was to be different. He would not be so rich, perhaps, as his brothers, but he would be the man of "position;" his name would be upon the bead roll of English squires; he would marry, perhaps—who knows?—some long-descended heiress; in any case, would enjoy that peculiar and almost mystic importance which in the eyes of an Englishman of the middle class, raises the possessor of land above the possessor of every other sort and description of chattel.

Unfortunately for his ambition, as well as for his own interests, Stephen, as we have seen, entirely failed to fall in with these projects on his behalf. The younger Halliday had his own ideal also of what it did and did not become a man to do, and

that ideal by no means corresponded with the elder's. He had imbibed—goodness knows how or where—an inordinate notion of the dignity and value of work, not as a means only, but as an end, and would discourse by the hour to any one he could get to listen to him, as to the heinousness, wickedness, and general moral degradation and culpability, of idleness in general, and of the so-called idle classes in particular. How this same sacred and important gospel of Work was to be enforced in his own person was, however, less clear. He did not want money—at least, he had never hitherto wanted it; consequently the putting together of a fortune—after all the simplest and most natural response to the summons—was not the one which most commended itself to him. His mind at this time ran a good deal on the subject of emigration; he revelled in dreams of starting forth upon

some entirely new and independent footing; shaking off the dust of an old and enfeebled world; breaking fresh ground as an explorer and discoverer, a clearer of the ground, and a hewer down of forests—all visions beside which his father's more practical views of the English squirearchy, and the dignities and emoluments of a man of property seemed to him very pale and paltry conceptions.

Perhaps, as at bottom the two men really cared for one another, the breach might in time have been healed, but for one circumstance. James Halliday in his anger had been unable to resist recurring to the weapon which hitherto in his own dealings with men he had found the most efficacious. He threatened Stephen that unless he fell in with his wishes, not one solitary sixpence of the fortune he had made should ever be his. This was enough. The one thing is wanting to

drive that reckless and unpractical young gentleman into open revolt. His father, he declared, might leave his money to whom he would ; what had belonged to his mother would suffice for him, and if he wanted more he would earn it ; there were idlers enough and fine gentlemen enough, heaven knew, in the world already, without his adding to the number ! In this mood he had rushed up to London, and there, as things chanced, had fallen in with a college friend, now a High Church parson, with a curacy in one of the worst and least attractive parts of the east end. With him Stephen had worked for a time, throwing himself into his new pursuit with a vehemence borne of his anger, finding, apparently, a sort of sensuous enjoyment in the very hideousness of his surroundings ; and it was while under the influence of this mood that he suddenly—to every one's intense surprise

—resolved upon himself going into the Church.

It was an odd choice, certainly, under the circumstances; not to be accounted for by any of the usual pivots upon which such decisions are supposed to turn. To the very few to whom he spoke on the matter at all he vouchsafed a sort of rough and ready explanation. He wanted work, he said, and he did not particularly care about making money; he liked poor people better than rich ones, and didn't see any sense in going off to Colorado or Patagonia when there was lots to be done at home. In one respect I had better hasten to say at once he had fewer obstacles to contend with than many another and a more apparently qualified man might have had. He had never had—never perhaps could have—what are called sceptical leanings. I do not mean that he was always fervently religious, still less rigidly orthodox;

his mind was by nature perhaps too independent for the one, and too little contemplative for the other; but he had never—consciously, at least—been assailed by any of those blacker and uglier doubts which rack and rive men's consciences. If the reader maintains that this is merely a proof of his shallowness, why then I am afraid I have no answer ready. Very likely it was. Indeed (except in so far as the all-sacred and important gospel of Work was concerned), he was not by any means a young man of exceptionally clear views or capacious grasp of mind, his mental horizon being for the most part decidedly circumscribed. His best point, perhaps, was a sort of natural kindliness, an inborn pitifulness, which made anything like harshness or tyranny a simple horror and disgust to him; indeed, that natural and heaven-sent obligation, which binds the strong over to the side of the

weak, was unusually developed in his case. One result of this was that, if he made few friends in his own class, he at least won golden opinions in the one below. If he was rough and overbearing with his equals, he was often, on the other hand, amazingly forbearing with those whose misfortune threw them in his way. Indeed, a tale of woe he never could resist, as half the old women in the parish had discovered before he had been a week in the place, and used to weep plenteous tears, and pour out moving tales whenever his reverence drew near, much to their own private gain and the despoiling of his said reverence's pocket; that scanty store on which he now depended thawing rapidly under these continually recurring appeals to his benevolence.

This particular old woman whom he was on his way to see that afternoon was not, he found, at all behind her neighbours in this respect, besides possessing the immense

advantage of being bedridden—an obvious plea of helplessness, which a man must needs be made of steel to resist. Halliday was not at all made of steel, and he consequently succumbed, with very little difficulty, to the plea. He knew of course that it was extremely foolish; the crone would certainly spend the money he gave her in tea and snuff, if in nothing worse; as for the tale of the orphan grandchild, and the sick daughter at service, he simply did not believe one word of it, but still there it was—for the life of him he could not keep his hands out of his pockets!

When, after nearly an hour's absence, he at length got back to the village, he found a group assembled in front of his lodging. On a bench sat Mr. Hyde, with a hamper before him containing an enormous salmon, on the approved method of cooking which he was solemnly haranguing Mrs. Pottles; Mr. Hyde's valet—a

very much more imposing personage than that insignificant-looking little gentleman, —standing in the background, with a face expressive of untold superiority and disgust. Halliday paused a moment to remonstrate with an urchin, who was dragging an unlucky puppy about by a string, and, by the time that matter was adjusted, Roger Hyde too had made an end of his harangue, and, coming up, passed his hand through his friend's arm.

“Well, my knight errant, and what follies have you perpetrated since?” he inquired, his ugly, intelligent little face beaming all over with a good-humoured smile.

Halliday smiled too, but less good-humouredly.

“A nice fellow you are to talk about follies,” he said; “a man who spends his whole life collecting bric-a-brac! What

was it you told me yesterday that you had paid for that last preposterous purchase of yours?"

"Excuse me, my good fellow, those are not follies; those are legitimate extravagancies. You might as well call securing that splendid salmon this afternoon a folly."

"So I do."

"That only shows the wretchedly low state of your culture. Do you know what has been calculated to be the effect upon a man's tone of a perpetual diet of mutton chops? and, with all due deference to Mrs. Pottles, I am not aware that we have had anything else to eat since I came here."

"I'm convinced it would have an admirable effect upon your tone if you had to do without a perpetual diet of mutton chops or anything else till you learnt to earn it," Halliday declared, grimly.

"Thank you. I think I've heard that remark before. Now, will you kindly say what you would suggest my doing?"

"Anything—something."

"Well, eating salmon is something. Collecting bric-a-brac—which, by the way, is an entirely obsolete term—is something, and a something, let me tell you, that it is not every man that can do. Besides, everybody, remember, has not got your luck. For instance, I might patrol these roads for a good many weeks without coming upon a fair unknown—an Andromeda, with whom I might perform the part of a Perseus."

Halliday turned away. "Stuff!" he cried impatiently.

"Not stuff at all, unless you mean that I am incapable under any circumstances of performing the part of a Perseus. Perhaps that is what you do mean?"

"You know, Roger, I mean nothing of the sort."

"Because, if so, I don't mind conceding that yours are nearer the heroic proportions than mine. Five feet six is a good height—a very pretty height, I consider—still I fancy Perseus and the rest of them were a trifle taller."

"I don't see that a man's height matters?"

"Very likely. I never knew a man yet who did properly value an advantage he happened to possess. However, to return to our Andromeda. I hope you've thought better of that ridiculous resolution of yours, and are prepared to call on her to-morrow and to take me with you?"

"I shall do nothing of the sort."

"Why not?"

"I told you my reasons before, Roger. If you're so particularly anxious for ladies' society, you'd better go back to London."

"Thank you, I am going. But that is not an answer to my question. Do you know how most people would explain your refusal?"

"How?"

"That you wanted to keep her to yourself."

Halliday flung up his chin. "They might think what they chose," he cried scornfully.

"Do you mean to tell me seriously and honestly that you won't go and see her after I have gone?"

"Certainly not."

"Don't you care a button if you never saw her again?"

"No. Why on earth should I?"

"Don't be so querulous. Every one is not such a Timon as you. Besides, in these cases, remember, there are always two sides to the question. Probably Andromeda is not so indifferent about her

deliverer as he is about her. How do you know she is not counting the hours till you meet again ? ”

“ I am certain she is doing nothing of the sort. ”

“ What will you bet that she won’t be at that early service of yours to-morrow morning ? ”

“ Anything you like—or, rather, nothing. I never bet. ’

“ Is it against your cloth ? ”

“ No. At least, that is, yes, I suppose it is ; but that is not my reason. My reason is that it’s an idiotic habit.

“ There I’m inclined to agree with you. But then, on the other hand, good heavens ! if we were to give up all our idiotic habits ! Why, smoking, I suppose, is one, and making love another, and ever so many more, without which life would be a mere blank—a waste and howling wilderness. ”

"A howling fiddlestick! It's enough to make a man sick, Roger, to hear any one of your sense talk such bosh. As if there was nothing better to do in the world than to philander about after people who you know perfectly well you don't care two straws about, and who, you may take my word for it, don't care two straws about you."

"Then, again, there's another idiotic habit, which consists in having a regard for a man who is always saying the rudest possible things to one, and that really is such an extremely idiotic one that I, for my part, am seriously thinking of giving it up," Hyde continued placidly.

Halliday's frown relaxed. "Oh, if you're going to be sentimental, I give in!" he cried. "Meantime, you had better go back and look after that preposterous salmon of yours. Probably you'll find that Mrs. Pottles has stewed

it down by this time, or is preparing to chop it up, and serve it us in a pie ! ”

“ Good heavens ! yes. There’s nothing a woman of that kind wouldn’t be capable of,” Hyde exclaimed, “ nothing ! So you won’t really take me to see your Andromeda ? ” he resumed, pausing to turn round upon the doorstep.

“ Certainly not.”

“ Not if I wait till Monday on purpose ? ”

“ Not if you wait till doomsday ! ”

“ Is that a proper expression for a clergyman, do you think ? ”

“ Very likely not. Clergymen, like other people, are liable to be provoked into using highly improper expressions.”

“ Not the ideal clergyman. He wouldn’t, under any provocation.”

“ But when did I ever set up to be one, I should like to know, Roger ? ” Halliday exclaimed hotly.

"If you didn't, you therein showed your sense. The ideal clergyman never flies into tantrums over trifles."

"The ideal clergyman never had you for a friend!" retorted the other, as he gathered up his armful of books and strode away in the direction of the schoolhouse.

CHAPTER VI.

AN AFTERNOON CALL.

MISS PRETTYMAN'S horror and consternation when she heard of the adventure that had befallen her friend, exceeded anything for which Muriel was even prepared. Her first idea was that they ought then and there to return to London—that very evening, if possible ; was it not too evident now how well-founded had been her own suspicions ? What could be so rash as for two unprotected ladies to remain in a place where such terrible events occurred—where similar events might occur daily ? who could tell what unseen dangers might not be hovering about them ? to what perils they might not at that very moment

be exposed? When, however, it became evident that nothing would induce Muriel to leave Hampshire in this summary fashion; that, on the contrary, she only laughed at her friend's fears, assuring her that the incident in no way created a precedent; that, because you were attacked by a pickpocket on Monday, it by no means followed that you would also be attacked by a pickpocket on Tuesday; and that for her own part she felt more in love with her new surroundings than ever; hearing all this, Miss Prettyman shifted her ground a little. Would Muriel, she asked, at least, promise not again to go straying off by herself? If she *must* go wandering about the forest—though why she must exceeded her own powers of comprehension—would she at least promise not to do so without some proper protection? To this, too, Muriel at first demurred, but in the end a compromise was

come to, and she agreed so far as to promise not again to start on any distant or doubtful expedition without at least securing the services of a guide. Fortunately for Miss Prettyman's peace of mind, the next few days turned out wet, so that there was no temptation for Muriel to break bounds, and the two ladies had to content themselves with the resources of their art, and with such limited distractions as they had had the forethought to provide for themselves.

Muriel had carried out the intention she announced on her first arrival, and had ordered down books of botany and natural history from London—smart little books with alluring headings and brightly coloured pictures, and big solid-looking books, by no means alluring to look at, and with no pictures at all. As a matter of fact, however, she learnt far more from Partridge, her landlord—Ned Partridge, his familiars

called him—than from all the books grave or gay. He was one of those men, not rare, happily, in country neighbourhoods, who are born with an innate love and enthusiasm for Nature; who know her, not from without, but from within, and value her, not for what she does for them, but for what they do for her—the sacrifices, discomforts, inconveniences they have faced, and are ready any day again to face in her service. As the weather cleared, and the sun once more revisited the earth, Muriel took to wandering about the forest under the chaperonage of this novel guardian. It was curious how the big, heavy-footed man, who appeared all thumbs and awkwardness in his own house, and under his wife's vinegar glances, seemed to waken up into sudden independence and readiness when he found himself at a safe distance from both. He had taken a great fancy to Muriel, and was never tired of

showing her all his forest lore ; teaching her, or trying to teach her, to know the birds by their notes, and the insects by their flight, to distinguish a rare moth or beetle, however far away, and however well concealed by its environment ; to expect and watch for that odd regularity of habit which make the animals we call wild the most methodical of all in their coming and going, their hours of eating and drinking and sleeping. Nor was it long before she, too, began to catch some of that enthusiasm—irrepressible and indescribable—which makes the naturalist a being apart, teaching him to forego his food, and home, and natural rest, and to sleep in holes and corners, and to live generally the life of a fox or a catamount, so only he can keep near to the objects of his devotion. She took to going out with Partridge in the early morning, before any one else in the house was astir ; tramping

through dew-laden grass, and drinking in those rarer aspects which Nature keeps for her devotees, and which prudent-minded people, who wait to get up till the day has been properly aired for them, know nothing whatever about. It was the evening rambles, however, that she enjoyed most. When they first came to the forest moonlight prevailed, and the moon, as every entomologist knows, is fatal to his hopes. As the month wore to an end, however, the moon too began to wane, and the nights were warm and starless. Then, as the darkness increased, and the sunset glow died out in fantastic-shaped patches of red along the lower boughs, and grey mists gathered, and the great trunks began to grow weird and ghostly, and the broad, white-faced hemlocks to show conspicuously in the twilight; then from every chink, and cranny, and crevice, grey forms began to appear, rising

with a rustle of wings, and a soft flitting to and fro over the herbage. As she walked along the leaf-strewn aisles and alleys Muriel would hear mysterious movings and rustlings—a sort of subdued stir, as if all the earth-spirits of the region were suddenly breaking loose. Then, as the shadows grew darker, and the last glimmer of sunset faded and died away, whole hosts—thick as Odyssean shades—began to haunt the rides and openings, and people the shadowy region above her head. Long before she had learnt a single one of their names, Muriel had got to know the creatures themselves by their flight—the moth that always shot straight up into the air as if in search of some invisible playmate amongst the stars; the moth that threaded its way corkscrew fashion through the underwood, without entangling in as much as a single brier; the moth that haunted the tops of the grass, swaying to

and fro with a pendulum-like flight, as if tied to the ground by invisible wires. Partridge, with his lighted lantern in his hand, would walk warily to and fro the more open rides, now and then pouncing upon some unlucky wayfarer ; Muriel herself preferring the duskiest and dreamiest alleys of all, where nothing encroached on the shadows, and the great oaks spread their wide-armed environment over everything. Sometimes a white owl would join her in her walk, swooping noiselessly past on its snowy pinions ; or a goatsucker (a "jar-bird," Partridge called it) would suddenly alight upon a branch and begin rousing the echoes with its harsh whirring cry, ending generally in a couple of clear prolonged notes, after which it would start off again on another cruise through the forest. Occasionally, at long intervals, Miss Prettyman too would be induced to join these revels, but there was something to

her so irregular, not to say indecorous, in the whole proceeding, that she generally made haste to retreat to the cottage long before Muriel was ready, or inclined to exchange the mystic seclusion of the forest for the much more prosaic shelter of Mrs. Partridge's best parlour.

It must not, however, be supposed, in justice to my heroine, that she was so regardless of all the canons of goodfellowship as to follow these new delights at all times and seasons, with or without regard to her comrade's convenience. On the contrary, she devoted herself—not, it must be owned, with very conspicuous success—to reconciling Miss Prettyman to her surroundings, and imparting to her some of her own superfluous and overflowing enjoyment. She had set up a little pony carriage, too, and in this she and Elizabeth took long drives in all directions along the pleasant forest ways—

to Beaulieu, with its abbey beside the tidal Exe, and Brockenhurst, with its deep lanes, and yew-shaded churchyard; to Wooton, too, beloved of the gipsies, and Burley wood, with its huge oaks, fast sinking, alas! under the burden of years and infirmities. Amongst these various avocations, it may, perhaps, be supposed that painting—the avowed end and aim of both friends' existences—was not a little likely to suffer. Happily, however, the days were long, and there was time enough for that, as well as for everything else. Elizabeth's miniatures were now fast approaching completion, and Muriel, too, had accomplished sundry sketches and studies, including another and a larger version of the moor below the cottage, which this time, begun under happier auspices, and with a less frantic impetuosity, promised—so, at least, she flattered herself—to prove her most successful effort in this line.

One afternoon, as she was thus at work under the broad hospitality of her favourite oaks, a stranger appeared sauntering slowly up the path. Strangers were so scarce in that secluded region, that involuntarily Muriel paused, glancing towards him with a momentary feeling of apprehension, her brush poised ready to descend upon the canvas. Nothing, however, could be less alarming than this particular stranger's appearance, which was spruce and *débonnaire* indeed to an unusual degree — unusual, that is, for a mere solitary saunter through the forest. He seemed to be on the point of passing, when suddenly he paused, and in a tone deferential enough to atone for whatever might be irregular in the request, craved permission to glance at the artist's work.

Muriel complied, without, however, displaying any particular alacrity, but Mr. Hyde (for of course it was that intelligent

little gentleman) contrived in a few words to exhibit so much appreciation for the Fine Arts ; to mingle so much discriminating admiration with a little not less discriminating criticism, that before long she found herself, rather to her own surprise, conversing almost as amicably as if their introduction had been effected in a less irregular fashion.

Hyde returned to his friend in high glee to boast of his own adroitness. Unfortunately he was leaving for London the next day, so that there was no opportunity at present of pursuing the acquaintanceship, but when he returned, as it had already been settled that he was to return, nothing, he declared, should hinder him from doing so. As for Halliday and his scruples, he declared they might go to the deuce ! Halliday had almost forgotten this conversation, and indeed the whole incident was beginning to fade from his

memory, when, happening one day to pass along the green-margined road leading to the Partridges' cottage, he too caught sight of a young lady at work before an easel, whom he was not long in recognizing as the heroine of his late adventure.

Had there been time he would probably have preferred to pass unnoticed, but Muriel had already seen him and had sprung up instantly from her seat.

"Is not that Mr. Halliday?" she exclaimed, at the same time stepping forward and holding out her hand. "I am so very glad to see you again," she added in tones of unmistakable cordiality.

Halliday, though he took the hand, by no means felt certain that he echoed the sentiment. He was not generally a shy man, yet on this occasion he undoubtedly did feel somewhat embarrassed. For one thing he was mortally afraid lest she should

forthwith begin again to thank him, and if there was one thing in the world which he hated and dreaded more than another, it was the being thanked.

He was soon relieved, however, on this score.

"I have so often wondered if we should ever meet again, Mr. Halliday," she said brightly, at the same time stooping down to pick up some brushes which had got scattered over the ground in her impetuosity. "I was so utterly bewildered the other day, that I don't think I even remembered to tell you my name. It is Ellis—Muriel Ellis, and as you see, I am an artist."

"Oh!" Halliday answered; that hard-worked monosyllable being the only thing which just then occurred to him. "You seem to paint—very well," he added presently, feeling the necessity for some additional remark.

She glanced at her work and shook her head lightly.

"No, no ; not well yet," she answered, smiling. "Some day or other I hope I shall, but at present I'm only a student. In fact, by rights I ought not, I believe, to be here at all ; but I had been so long in London and was so tired of it, that I thought I would play truant a little, and I persuaded a friend of mine—another artist—to come down with me, and we have taken rooms at the Partridges' cottage."

"Oh!" Halliday said again. He knew nothing about art, and consequently did not half understand what she was talking about, but gathered that she was in some way or other professional.

"And are you—do they make you—comfortable?" he asked, casting vaguely about for something further to say.

"Yes, very, thank you," she answered.

"At least"—with a little laugh—"Mrs. Partridge is rather a stern sort of hostess; she seems to think that we give a good deal of trouble, which really I think is rather a delusion on her part; but on the whole we get on very well, and Mr. Partridge is a dear friend of mine. He has been teaching me all sorts of delightful things."

"Oh!" Halliday said for the third time, "You are not at all the worse for your fright the other day, I hope?" he added stiffly.

"Not in the least, thank you. In fact, my friend Miss Prettyman suffered a great deal more from it I think than I did. She was dreadfully frightened when she heard of what had happened, and lest I should lose my way again she has made me promise never to stir anywhere without a guardian. See, here comes one of them!" she added, laughing, as the smallest and

fattest of the Partridge children appeared in sight, his thumb in his mouth, and his wide eyes opening wider at sight of the clergyman. "Well, Tommy, have you come to help me to carry home my drawings?"

Halliday felt so relieved by this unexpected abstention from anything like demonstrative gratitude, that he began to grow quite at his ease, and came forward with unusual alacrity to help in putting together the various painting paraphernalia which lay scattered about.

Some unfinished sketches were lying on the ground near him, one of which he picked up.

"That is Grivatt's farm, is it not?" he said, turning it round.

"Yes, I think that is the name. What a charming old place it is. I am so fond of farmhouses—picturesque ones I mean, of course. I always stay in one

when I am with my grandfather in Norfolk."

"I stay a good deal in Norfolk, too," answered Halliday; "or, rather, I used to do so formerly. An uncle of mine lives there."

"Does he? I wonder if he lives near my grandfather?"

"It is near D——"

"Why that is my grandfather's town; where he sells all his meat and vegetables. My mother used to live there too, before she married my father. What is your uncle's name?"

"Sir Anthony Beachamp."

"Do you know, I really think that is the name of my grandfather's landlord! His name is Flack—John Flack. He lives at Boldre's farm, near Boldre's mere."

Halliday experienced a sudden shock of surprise, and anything but particularly agreeable surprise. It was nothing to

him, of course, who or what his companion's relations might be ; why, indeed, should it be ? Still, like most men, he was apt—unconsciously perhaps—to pride himself on a kind of intuitive perception in these sort of matters, and a minute or two before he had said to himself that whatever or whosoever she might be, there was no question about it that this girl before him was a lady—a lady probably by birth, a lady certainly by everything that constitutes the difference between one specimen of humanity and another. And now he learnt from her own lips that she was no other than the granddaughter of old John Flack—a man whom he had heard his uncle denounce scores of times as the veriest old Harpagon and skin-flint in the parish ; who, if he had had occasion to go up to the hall, would as a matter of course have been relegated to the hospitality of the steward's room ; whose daughter-in-law, too, was that

appallingly vulgar woman with a red face and a variegated shawl, whom he remembered seeing in church, and whose sons were the greatest louts and scamps in the neighbourhood. And *this* girl was their relation. The granddaughter of the one and the niece of the other! This girl, so graceful, so handsome, so refined, so perfectly mistress of herself; so dignified, and at the same time, winning, in all her looks and bearing. *She* old Flack's granddaughter! the niece and presumably constant associate of the woman in the shawl! It was incredible, inconceivable, not to be believed! I cannot say that it was entirely to the credit of young Mr. Halliday's consistency that the tidings should have been such a very terrible shock to him; but so it was, and the fact being so, I am bound, as a faithful historian, to record it.

Probably Muriel would have noticed his

embarrassment, but that she happened to be at that moment engaged in unfastening and folding together the little portable easel on which she worked. This done, she turned to him with a smile.

"I won't venture to ask you to come and see us now, Mr. Halliday," she said; "as I see that it is one o'clock, and one o'clock is the luncheon hour, or rather our dinner hour, when Mrs. Partridge's whole energies will be concentrated on the preparation of our two mutton chops. But if you were passing some afternoon this week, or, indeed, any time before the twentieth, and would look in, it would be very kind. We are certain to be at home, or, at all events, not very far off, and I should like you to see my friend's miniatures. They are really most beautiful things in their way. Besides, I know she particularly wishes to see you. Only I must warn you," she added, laughing,

“that you will probably not escape without having to undergo some more gratitude. I let you off my share of it, you see, but I cannot really answer for my friend.”

Halliday responded somewhat stiffly, his soul still oppressed by the vision of the woman in the shawl. He promised, however, to call in the course of the week, and further begged permission to bring a friend—a better judge of painting, he said, than he could pretend to be.

Muriel acceded willingly, and they parted, Halliday hastening on to keep an appointment in the village. A day or two later Roger Hyde returned, and one afternoon towards the end of the week the two young men walked over to the cottage to pay their call.

They were met at the door by Mrs. Partridge, who informed them, in her shrillest accents, that Miss Ellis and Miss Prettyman were both out walking; had

gone out immediately after dinner, and were not likely to be back till evening. As they were on their way back through the garden on receipt of this intelligence, however, they were met by the two ladies, and all four turned back together into the parlour.

It was a small, and not on ordinary occasions probably a particularly attractive apartment, but this afternoon, what with the sun streaming in through the open window, and the thrushes and blackbirds making melody in the bushes outside, it looked cheerful and inviting enough. A number of Muriel's sketches had been pinned up against the wall, and these, with the books on the table and the ferns and wild flowers, which overflowed every cranny and corner, gave it—for so provisional an abode—a wonderfully settled and inhabited look.

Elizabeth Prettyman presently slipped

away to try and inveigle Mrs. Partridge into supplying tea for the visitors, so Muriel was left to entertain the two latter single-handed. Fortunately, whatever Halliday might be, Hyde was not one of those persons who tax severely the powers of an entertainer; declining to sit down, he wandered to and fro the room, uttering fresh exclamations of admiration at every fresh study and sketch he encountered. Finally, he paused before Elizabeth's table.

"And these—are these also your paintings, Miss Ellis?" he inquired, turning round to Muriel, who, with Halliday, had seated herself nearer to the window.

"No, indeed, they are not," she answered eagerly, "I can do nothing like that. Elizabeth Prettyman's work makes mine look dreadfully coarse and crude. Do look at this one," she added, crossing the room, and lifting one of the little slabs of ivory

from the table. "Is it not wonderful? One ought, though, to have a magnifying glass to appreciate it properly."

"Marvellous, indeed, marvellous! Now do tell me, Miss Ellis, and don't think me impertinent. Does your friend do these for herself, for her own amusement?"

"Oh no; it is a commission. When we go back to London, they will be sent to whoever has ordered them."

"Then, if she would undertake commissions for one person, she would undertake them for another, which means that she would undertake one for me?"

"I dare say she would if you asked her nicely," Muriel said, smiling.

"I will ask her very nicely; as nicely as ever I know how. Seriously, you must tell her that it would be a kindness—a true act of charity. For years I have been pining to get some particular miniatures copied, and never yet have I seen

a touch that I felt I could trust; now in your friend I at last find my ideal. If she fails me, I shall immediately fall back into all my previous despondency."

"Oh, but she won't fail you," Muriel exclaimed, more gratified—as, indeed, Hyde soon perceived—than by all the previous praises lavished upon her own performances. "I am sure she will do them for you," she added hurriedly, as Miss Prettyman came back into the room without, however, the tea, which Mrs. Partridge entirely declined to furnish at so irregular an hour as five o'clock.

After this the conversation took a general turn, Roger Hyde still, however, sustaining the chief part. They talked of the forest, what had been seen, and what had not been seen. Finally, it was agreed that a joint expedition should be arranged for the following Monday, Halliday promising for once to keep

clear of all his usual parochial entanglements. Soon after this the two young men took their leave, Hyde lingering a moment to say another word to Muriel about the miniatures in the porch.


"Did you really want those things, Roger?" Halliday said, as his friend rejoined him.

"Well, partly. That is to say, there really are some old miniatures belonging to an aunt of mine, which I should rather like to get copied, though I dare say it would have never occurred to me if I hadn't seen the little woman's work."

"But why should you be so particularly anxious to employ her?"

"Obviously, my dear fellow, to gratify our Andromeda. I couldn't very well offer to buy her own things, so the next best thing was to offer to buy her friend's."

"Why couldn't you have offered to buy hers?"



"Because you may be sure she doesn't sell them."

"Yes, she does."

"You don't mean to say that she is professional too?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"What makes you think that, Stephen?"

"Simply that she told me as much herself."

"Not really! Well, I never should have guessed it. The other little woman, of course, has the needy artist written in every line of her, but our friend—your original acquaintance—isn't the least the cut. In fact, I was puzzling my head as to what could have been the link between them, and came to the conclusion that Miss Prettyboy, or whatever they call her, must once upon a time have been her drawing-mistress—Andromeda's, I mean—though of course she has gone a long way ahead of her now."

"You think she paints well, then?"

"Decidedly. Don't you?"

"Yes, I did; but then, you know, I know nothing about it."

"Ellis—Ellis—who the deuce is she, I wonder?" Hyde continued meditatively. "It is a good name enough, still there are Ellises and Ellises, just as there are Smiths and Smiths. Never mind. I'll easily find out when I get back to town."

Halliday walked on a few minutes in silence. He felt oddly disinclined to repeat what he had been told about the relations in Norfolk. Yet, upon the other hand, why on earth should he hesitate? he asked himself irritably. Evidently their new acquaintance had no objection to speak of it herself.

"I believe I do know something about her belongings," he said at last rather reluctantly. "Her grandfather, it seems, is a tenant of my uncle's,"

"How did you find that out?"

"She told me so the other day."

"She appears to have told you a good deal."

"She told me that, at any rate."

"Well, and this grandfather, what is he? A gentleman?"

"Not at all; a common farmer."

"You don't say so! Well, I own that does surprise me. I could have sworn she was a lady."

"So she is, of course," Halliday said quickly.

"But how can she be, my good fellow, if her grandfather, you say, is only a common farmer? Probably her father, if she has one, is not so very much better. He *may* be, of course; but the presumption is the other way."

"Even so, that needn't hinder her from being a lady."

"Oh, for the matter of that, it needn't

hinder your washerwoman. We all know the term is a remarkably elastic one. Still, it does, or ought to mean, something still, and when I said a lady I meant in the old, not the new-fashioned sense. Certainly she has all the air of it."

"And she is one, I tell you," Halliday repeated.

"Well, so I should have said. The truth is, the landmarks are shifting at such a pace that no human being can say where they've got to, and one only makes a fossil of one's self by insisting upon people producing their forbears,—especially people with faces and figures like our friend Andromeda."

"Do leave off repeating that foolish name," Halliday said irritably.

"Well, Miss Ellis, then. Only the worst is," Hyde continued, not without a spice of maliciousness, "one is so morally certain to be reminded of it sooner or

later. Just when you think you are getting along beautifully, and that never before was there such a dear delightful being in the world, out comes some truly appalling solecism that makes your soul suddenly shrivel up within you like a — like—— Can't you help a man when you see him struggling after a simile?— like a cockroach under a gridiron !”

“ I shouldn't say Miss Ellis was at all likely to commit solecisms,” Halliday said stiffly.

“ Well, she has kept wonderfully clear of them so far, certainly,” Hyde admitted. “ Still, you never can tell. The cloven foot, or in this case, I suppose, it would be more appropriate to say the hob-nailed shoe, is certain to peep out sooner or later, I am afraid. However, we'll give her until after Monday. By that time we ought to be able to form an impartial opinion. So till then I reserve judgment.”

"She ought to be extremely obliged to you, I am sure," exclaimed Halliday.

"So I dare say she would be, my dear fellow, if she knew anything about it," his friend responded placidly.

They were by this time not far from the entrance of the village, so Halliday announced that he had an engagement to keep at the schoolhouse, and accordingly posted away, his feet tramping noisily over the dead leaves. Hyde shrugged his shoulders, and, released from the necessity of keeping step with his longer-limbed companion, relapsed into his usual sauntering pace. It was rather pleasant where he was. The thick part of the wood had been left behind, and the path lay along the middle of a wide green ride, running parallel to that other and more tangled pathway into which Muriel had strayed by mistake. A quantity of pigs—half-wild creatures turned out into the

forest to pick up a living—were routing and snuffling about with much apparent relish amongst the leaves. Presently a boy appeared, and endeavoured to drive them in the direction of the village—a proceeding which they resented with loud squeaks and grunts, running briskly away in the opposite direction, as fast as their pursuer attempted to approach them.

Hyde laughed. It was rather like Halliday and his attempts to coerce the recusant youth of the locality, he thought. “Poor old Halliday, what a bore they must think him!” he meditated between the puffs of his cigar. “If it was even his own parish one could better understand his taking such an inordinate amount of bother about it, but as it is——” And he shrugged his shoulders anew over the possibility of discovering any clue to such utterly wanton and enigmatical aberrations. “He is the best fellow in the world, but, upon

my word, it does seem uncommonly like oddity," he ruminated. "And yet his father is shrewd enough; as shrewd a man, I suppose, as any in Lancashire. It must be from the mother's side. Those Beachamps are queer, deuced queer, every one of them."

By this time he had got to the end of his cigar, and nearly to the end of his green lane, and emerging from the trees, suddenly came within sight of the first of the groups of cottages, all with small puffs of smoke ascending skyward in an eminently suggestive fashion. It set Mr. Hyde thinking of his own dinner—by no means a slight or unimportant item in his day's economy. Perhaps it would be as well if he were to go himself and see after that old woman again, he thought. He had desired his man Simmonds to do so, but Simmonds was such an unmitigated idiot, there was no trusting him in such

matters. It was really necessary, he felt, that some one should see to it, for he would be sorry to leave poor Halliday in the lurch again, added to which he was not a little curious himself to see something more of that painting girl; both friendship and curiosity, however, had their limits, and if they were going to have half cooked mutton again for dinner this evening, no amount either of one or of the other would enable him, he felt sure, to hold out for another day!

CHAPTER VII.

MORNING CARES.

" IF you please, miss, mother bade me tell you as there was sixpence-halfpenny to pay the postman this morning, and as it's the second time it's happened, she thinks as you ought to tell your friends not to forget to put the stamps on ; and, beg pardon, miss, but that was what mother bade me say."

" Very well, Patty, here is the sixpence-halfpenny, and you're a good little girl to give your mother's message so correctly. Now run away."

" Muriel, I never heard such impertinence ; that woman is getting unbear-

able!" Miss Prettyman exclaimed, almost before the door had closed upon the envoy.

"Do take care, Elizabeth. Patty will hear you."

"I don't care whether she hears me or not. Daring to send you such a message by that chit! I should like to have boxed her ears."

"Whose ears? Patty's? That would have been very unjust. It was not her fault."

"What does her mother mean by behaving so?"

"I was just wondering. She was friendly enough at first, but certainly she has been wanting in civility lately."

"Civility!" exclaimed Miss Prettyman, in a tone which implied that words were not to be found to express the height and depth of Mrs. Partridge's offending in this respect.

"All the same it was foolish of Sophia not to put stamps enough upon the letters," Muriel continued. "You know they're left here before six o'clock, so that I dare say it is troublesome having to look for the proper number of pennies at that hour of the morning."

"Oh, as for that, Muriel, mistakes will happen, and I dare say your sister-in-law fully intended to put stamps on," answered Miss Prettyman, who, probably, another time, would not have been so anxious to take up the cudgels on Mrs. Skynner's behalf. "The truth is," she went on, "I believe Mrs. Partridge is jealous—jealous of your going out so much alone with her husband."

"Jealous, Elizabeth! Do you mean that she thinks I am likely to interfere with her domestic felicity?" Muriel said, laughing.

"Now, Muriel, how can you suppose I mean anything so absurd? Of course

I mean jealous, not of you, but of him—jealous of your making so much more fuss over him than over herself. I notice she is always twice as sharp upon the poor man after he has been out walking with you; and that evening you had him in here to explain about the moths, I heard her throwing the things about in the kitchen, and going on dreadfully for hours and hours after.”

“Poor, unfortunate, innocent Partridge!”

“Well, but, dear, you know you really have been so very kind to him—quite remarkably so; talking and going on just as if he was a gentleman—a friend of yours.”

“So I do look upon him as a friend of mine.”

“Now, Muriel, you know that is just your exaggeration. I am sure he is an excellent, worthy man—very good and

worthy, indeed. How he puts up with that dreadful little woman, I can't think. In his place I should beat her, I feel sure I should ; but still, to talk of a man of that class being a friend of yours is really—really quite——”

“ Really what, Elizabeth ? Why should I not call him a friend ? And as to his class, I don't see any such great difference between him and my grandfather. Why, when I am at Boldre Farm, I often dine with the farm servants, and they are not to be compared to Mr. Partridge.”

Miss Prettyman winced. She could not endure these allusions to the less dignified side of her friend's parentage. “ Muriel, you know very well that you ought not to talk like that,” she said solemnly. “ It is extremely wrong—flying in the face of Providence, and everything. You are a lady of birth and education ; your brother was Lord Dumbelton ; your great grand-

father was Lord Dumbelton ; your own father, if he had lived, would have been Lord Dumbelton. A woman takes rank from her father's family, not from her mother's."

"Well, but, Elizabeth, if I was the Queen of Sheba herself, really I cannot see why that need hinder me from making a friend of Mr. Partridge," Muriel said, smiling. "At all events, I do look on him as one. I have the greatest possible respect and regard for him."

"That is all very well, Muriel ; but still it does not make him your equal—a man of your class," Miss Prettyman persisted.

"And I tell you, Elizabeth, that I don't care one button about my class. I am an artist, and an artist belongs to every class, or to no class at all for that matter;" and as if to put an end to the discussion, Miss Ellis jumped up from the table—for the above conversation had taken place at

breakfast time—and crossed the room to ring the bell.

“ Talking of artists, I had a letter from Mr. Wygram this morning,” she said, when the breakfast things had at last been carried away, and the two friends were again alone. “ His was one of the letters Sophia forgot to put a stamp on.”

“ Indeed ! and did he write about anything—anything particular ? ” Miss Prettyman asked eagerly. “ But do not tell me if you would prefer not,” she added with sudden primness.

“ Why should I prefer not ? He only wrote to say that if I liked he could have those pictures—the rejected ones, you know—sent to Liverpool. He thinks they would be likely to hang one of them at the exhibition there.”

“ And what answer shall you give him ? ”

“ Oh, I shall tell him that I won't do

anything about it at present; I shouldn't care to send them away without seeing them again, and there is no particular hurry, as the exhibition doesn't open for six weeks, and we shall be back in London in a fortnight's time."

"Sooner than that, Muriel; at least I must, for, you see, my mother expects my brother Samuel's children from India almost immediately, and I ought to be back before they arrive."

"I am afraid those children, my poor Elizabeth, will be the torment of your life," Muriel said compassionately.

"I expect so, too," Miss Prettyman replied dolorously. "However, it is a duty," she added solemnly, "at least, I suppose so. I only hope they won't be always ill; Indian children, they say, are so delicate. It is a mercy, I am sure, we have Dr. King so close at hand."


"By the way, that reminds me I had a

letter from Kitty King, too, this morning," Muriel said: "a long letter, all about her doings at the Art School. She wants to come down here, but I don't think I can encourage her to do that. For one thing, she and Mrs. Partridge would infallibly squabble: and for another, it is hardly worth while, as we are leaving ourselves so soon."

"Oh no, pray don't, Muriel. I always think you're inclined to spoil that girl. She really is such a foolish, flighty creature. And as to her painting, it is all nonsense. She only pretends to paint just to attract attention."

"Poor Kitty! I think you, on the contrary, are extremely hard on her, Elizabeth; and as to my spoiling her, that really is simply nonsense. When have I ever been able to do anything for her?"

"Well, you always go on as if she was a great friend of yours, and you can't really care for such a silly, giddy creature."



"Not care for her! But I do care, as it happens, extremely. Who could help caring for anything so pretty?"

Miss Prettyman straightened her neck, and drew down the corners of her mouth. "You think far too much about mere looks, Muriel," she said, disapprovingly.

"I don't see that, Elizabeth. Nobody talks about the 'mere looks' of a tree, or of a landscape; why, then, of a face? But that reminds me," she added, jumping up, "I must really go off and get on with my picture, or it will never be finished in time; but I shall be back soon. And don't forget that this is Monday, and that the pony carriage will be here at twelve o'clock, to take us to Stoney Cross."

After her friend had gone, Miss Prettyman did not settle down to her own painting quite so expeditiously as usual. She was a good deal exercised in her mind

both as to her own and as to Muriel's future. The coming of these children of her brother's was not an event to which she could pretend to look forward with any complacency. In that small house, which only just comfortably held herself and her mother, how would it be when there were three unruly children—she felt convinced they would be unruly—upsetting her painting things, running riot about the house, and bringing chaos amongst their orderly surroundings? If she had been even devoted to her brother, and so could look forward to caring for the children on his account, she would not, she felt, so much have minded it: but she had seen nothing of him for the last sixteen or seventeen years, during which he had rarely written or interested himself in their affairs, even when those affairs were in a very critical condition; how then, she asked herself, could she be expected sud-

denly to feel devoted to his children? Of course with her mother it was different. For one thing, Mrs. Prettyman was a genuine child-lover, and had always bitterly lamented the fact of her daughter Alicia having no children, and the terrible distance which separated her from her Indian grandchildren. Now Elizabeth could not pretend to be a child-lover—in the abstract; and had the distance between India and Chelsea been an insurmountable one, the fact just then would not, it must be owned, have been without consolation for her.

She was not long, however, in turning away from her own affairs to considering those of her friend. Had there been anything in that letter from Mr. Wygram besides the offer with regard to the picture? she wondered. Miss Prettyman was not by any means a particularly imaginative person or at all given to

creating ideals, still like every other woman that ever was born, she too had her masculine ideal, and that masculine ideal was at present realized by this very Mr. Wygram. True he was an artist, and, generally speaking, Elizabeth was not at all an admirer of her own fraternity. Mr. Wygram, however, was an exception. To begin with, he was a very successful artist; not an Academician indeed, or even an Associate, but on the high road to be both one and the other. Then, again, like Muriel herself, he was known to be independent of his brush, a fact which it cannot be denied gave him a greatly extended prestige and importance in her eyes. Over and above all this, he was a man of excellent family, moving in high and dignified circles, with manners, too, superior and dignified enough for any circle. Now that this model of men and artists admired Muriel, Miss Prettyman had no doubt;

that moreover he wished to marry her, she in her own mind felt convinced. Would Muriel listen or would she not? That was precisely what she desired, yet, at the same time, hesitated to ask.

In her various cogitations on the subject Miss Prettyman had long since come to the conclusion that it would be highly desirable for Muriel to marry. Not assuredly from any abstract admiration for the married state, but from a careful and conscientious consideration of her friend's peculiar circumstances. There was something unusual, nay, even to her own mind, slightly improper, in a young girl possessing such an amount of independence and liberty, even though that young girl was as superior to others of her age and sex as Muriel Ellis. Then again there were other considerations. Miss Prettyman was not by any means a spiteful or vindictive woman, still under the circum-

stances she would perhaps have been almost more than mortal had she not felt a certain measure of Christian vindictiveness against Mrs. Skynner. At all events, she did so, and the sight of that lady driving in Muriel's carriage and doing the honours of Muriel's house invariably inspired her with a keen desire to see her friend speedily married—to a husband, moreover, who would probably not be at all desirous of the continued presence of his wife's sister-in-law.

Now how, when, and where was this desirable consummation to be brought about? that was the question. If Mr. Wygram would only have come down while they were still in the forest, then something, she felt sure, might have come of it! Unfortunately, this was about the last thing she feared he was likely to think of. He was not, certainly, romantic; and this, if only an additional recom-

mendation in her own eyes, was but too likely, she feared, to prove the very reverse in Muriel's.

While her thoughts were still thus engaged, but before any actual scheme of operations had suggested itself to her mind, the object of those thoughts returned, and shortly afterwards the pony carriage appeared at the door, and, the luncheon basket being packed, the two ladies started on their expedition.

Muriel was not a particularly expert whip, but the pony was reasonably willing, and the roads were wide and good. Once clear of the green-margined lane, the little carriage bowled rapidly along, up hill and down dale, now flitting through some grassy glade, where the birch trees shook out their fresh green tresses over their heads, now out upon one of the more open "parks," where the blackened heather lay as yet untouched by the green of the

spring ; past clumps of stag-horned oaks and clusters of small cottages, with brown sloping roofs and "wigs" of clematis over every doorway ; past larger houses, flanked with huddled groups of farm buildings, grey with lichen, or inch deep in bright green moss ; past streams, which struggled ineffectually under their burden of frogbit and duckweed, and pools, whose ink-black waters were gilded with a wealth of marigolds bobbing their golden petals against the surface. The morning at first was somewhat overcast, but the clouds were high, and the wind, which blew against their faces, came redolent with all the balm of the south.

Before long they were mounting the slow, gradual incline which leads to Stoney Cross. Just as they were nearing the summit, they caught sight of the two young men ; Halliday striding along with a big basket on his arm, his long black

coat flapping against his heels ; Hyde, spruce and trim as usual, his small person arrayed in a remarkably well-fitting shooting suit, of which a pair of saffron-coloured stockings were perhaps the most conspicuous items. At sound of the wheels both men turned, and waited until they came up ; then they walked beside them to the inn topping the ridge above. Here the pony was made over to the care of an ostler, and the two pair of friends sauntered slowly on together along the road leading to Fritham.

Below them now on either hand lay the wide rolling forest country ; not all forest, however ; brown, chess-board-like squares of cultivated ground and broad clear spaces, bare of all growth save heather, covering miles and miles. The sun had come out again, but the shadows were still sweeping hither and thither in clear, though broken, reticulations over the

plain ; now grey, now brown, now again purple almost to indigo. Far off, Southampton water lay like a ribbon of silver, the white houses on the further side so clear that they might be counted. In front of them stretched the broad shallow valley of the Avon ; while southward, half lost in fog and sea-mists, rose a pale-blue ridge of land, which, upon a still clearer day, might perhaps have proclaimed itself to be the Needles.

The first proposal had been for the party to lunch on the top of the ridge itself, but, the sun coming out with unexpected vigour, it was decided to beat a retreat, and seek the shelter of the woods ; and accordingly they turned back to the inn to reclaim their baskets.

“Don’t you think you could manage to carry a little more, my dear fellow?” Hyde exclaimed, as Halliday proceeded to load himself with both baskets and a

mountain of rugs. "At least, for the sake of clerical propriety, give me those bottles," he added. "Suppose some of your parishioners were to see you!"

Halliday, however, was not to be persuaded to part with any of his load. Stuffing the bottles deeper into the basket, he strode off downhill beside Miss Préttyman, Hyde and Muriel following a little in the rear.

"He is a deal too big and muscular for a clergyman, that's the fact," the latter remarked confidentially to his companion as they were leaving the ridge.

"Mr. Halliday? Is he? I didn't know there was any rule against clergymen being big and strong," Muriel said, smiling.

"No rule, of course; still there's a certain cut. Every profession, you know, has its own proper cut, and Halliday isn't a bit the cut of a parson, and never will

be either, if he lives to the age of Methuselah. He'll always be the square peg in the round hole, do what he will."

"That sounds a very melancholy prospect," she said, laughing a little at his solemnity.

"It's true, though, all the same. You couldn't imagine him a bishop, now, I ask you, could you, Miss Ellis, or a dean even?"

"Well, no, now you put it to me, I don't know that I could," Muriel answered, laughing again as she glanced at the oddly-matched couple below her, Halliday's long legs and rather military stride contrasting with the small mincing steps and prim diminutive figure of his companion.

Once at the bottom of the hill the party again left the high road, and turned off along a footpath meandering irresolutely through a thin skirting of larch; then through a grove of sycamores, where

the ground was covered with a small forest of seedlings, their short red stems overshadowed with leaves large and broad as those of the parent stem above. After this they came upon an advanced guard of oaks and elms—mere infants barely a century old—these in their turn giving place to larger and lordlier growths beyond. Presently, in a small opening, they came upon a sudden sheen of blue bells, as though the very heavens themselves were breaking through. This being unanimously voted the place for luncheon, the baskets were slung upon a tree, and it being still early, the whole party sauntered off through the glade, with the combined object of at once exploring the neighbourhood, and securing a still more commanding appetite wherewith to do justice to the coming repast.


CHAPTER VIII.

UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE.

Nothing, perhaps, is more striking in this particular forest than its air of permanence, of stability. Elsewhere—in alien forests especially—conquest and revolution seem to have left their marks even upon the very tree-trunks. Here, on the contrary, everything is unchanged. The thirteen centuries which have passed since the coming of the Saxon Cerdic have to all practical purposes left things as they found them. The groves and glades seem still re-echoing with the hunting notes of the Red King. The very oaks still spread out their

“braunches brode laden with levis new
That sprongin out agen the sonn  shene,”

for all the world as they did in Chaucer’s



time. To-day, however, it was the youthfulness, rather than the age of the forest, which seemed to strike the beholders. The spirit of the spring-time was abroad, rejuvenating even the hoariest oaks, and filling with its ruddy blitheness the dusky glades. Overhead a just perceptible sound of rustling came from the tops of the trees, against which the sun smote, breaking down through every opening, and weaving a faint fantastic imagery upon the broad grey trunks. Underneath bees and butterflies innumerable flitted to and fro over the brambles; baby rabbits—mere fluffs of light brown fur—scampered audaciously along the grass-grown rides. Sunlight flickered; leaves danced merrily; all the traditional joyousness and revelry of the good green woods seemed present with them, and all four enjoyed it in their different ways; even Elizabeth Prettyman, staidest and discreetest of mortals, seem-

ing to catch something of the frolic-someness and jocund gaiety of her surroundings. She was not, however, a very ardent pedestrian, and presently proposed to return to the luncheon ground, while the others continued their stroll. This Muriel, however, would not hear of, and accordingly they all turned back together towards the encampment.

Even here under the shade of the trees it was decidedly warm. Underfoot the fallen leaves and twigs felt as dry and crisp as so many pieces of parchment. An old thorn tree they passed gave out a series of distinct cracks, as the sun rested on its dead or dying branches. Overhead the light moved leisurely along, bringing out sudden flecks of colour from the still growing and expanding foliage. They paused to look down a long green glade, fenced in with tall oaks; a ridge of bracken running along on either side like the

wainscoting of a wall. Below one of the oak trees a pair of orange-tip butterflies were playing to and fro over the brambles ; a little higher up a yellowhammer had alighted on the end of a branch, its tiny breast and yellow straining throat set clear against the sky behind. The glow and life and sunny warmth of the scene was indescribable—as if the whole coming summer had suddenly decided upon incorporating itself into one bright fleeting instant.

When they got back to the encampment a couple of forest ponies were found to have established themselves on the ground, one, a sturdy little beast with a yellow mane and tail, being actively engaged in insinuating its nose into the baskets. These, however, were soon put to the rout, and the luncheon proceeded merrily.

Muriel had set her heart upon securing a sketch of the glade they had just passed,

so, leaving the others still busy over the remainder of the feast, she got out her painting things, and hurried back to the spot she had already selected. She was presently joined by Hyde.

"What energy you have, Miss Ellis," he said, dropping on the ground beside her. "You really are almost a *pendant* to Halliday. Between you you make a poor sybarite like myself feel conscience-stricken."

"Is Mr. Halliday so very energetic?" Muriel inquired. "At least, that is a very ungrateful question of mine," she added quickly, "for he certainly showed his energy on the first occasion we met. But now to-day—he has not displayed any inordinate activity to-day, has he?"

"He walked ten miles this morning before we started though."

"Ten miles! That does sound energetic! Not merely for exercise surely?"

"Oh no. Some one—an aunt, or cousin, or grandmother of somebody else—cut her finger or scalded her toe, I really forget which, and he went to see how it was getting on."

"That was extremely kind."

"Kind? Well, yes, I suppose it was kind enough; still, I call it very ridiculous. What was the good? He couldn't cure her toe or finger."

"I dare say she liked seeing him, though."

"I dare say she liked what he gave her; he'll be in the workhouse himself soon if he goes on at this rate," Hyde said, flicking irritably at a gnat which seemed disposed to establish itself upon his hand.

Muriel said nothing. It was no business of hers, she thought, whether Mr. Halliday could or could not afford to throw his money away.

"You and he have known one another a long time, I suppose?" she said, after working away for some minutes in silence.

"Ages. Ever since the first day he put a high hat on—much too small for him, I remember, by the way, it was. That was at Eton, you know, and afterwards we spent a couple of holidays at his uncle's, Sir Anthony Beachamp's, in Norfolk, and have been more or less chums ever since."

"He was talking about his uncle the other day," she said.

"Yes?" interrogatively. "Have you ever come across any of them?" Hyde continued somewhat disingenuously, as Muriel did not immediately respond. "They are a sort of far-away cousins of mine, but don't let that hinder you from expressing a candid opinion. Certainly they are the oddest household in the world."

“Oh, but I don’t know them at all,” she answered quickly. “I have just seen Sir Anthony, and that is all. My grandfather, with whom I stay in Norfolk, is a tenant of his. But how are they odd?” she continued inquiringly.

“Well, physically to begin with. Sir Anthony’s mother was a Portuguese; a terrible woman, I am told, with gleaming eyes, and a moustache which curled whenever she was in a rage, which she was generally. She, happily, is dead and gone long ago, and Sir Anthony, whatever else he is, at all events looks like an Englishman, whereas his son and daughter look as if they had just walked straight out of the Escorial, or the Ghetto, or some such place; and now, to crown the incongruities of the family, he has gone and married himself to a little pink-and-white Miss Somebody, a schoolgirl—at least, she was a schoolgirl at the time of his marriage

—a year younger than his daughter, and, I hear, an inordinate flirt, which, to do her justice, Lena never was. They have been abroad for the last two years, so that I have practically lost sight of them; but this year they are to be at home, and I propose to myself to extract no small entertainment by renewing my cousinly intimacy with them.”

“It does sound rather a mixed household, certainly,” Muriel said, smiling. “And are they as unlike mentally as physically?”

“More; a great deal more. However, I may save myself the expense of a description, for if you are going to be in Norfolk this autumn, you will be certain to meet, and you can then form your own conclusions.”

“Oh, but I don’t think that is at all likely,” she answered. “I never see anybody in Norfolk except my grandfather,

who is a very old man, and goes nowhere ; besides being only a farmer," she added.

"That must be rather dull, seeing only your grandfather," Hyde answered, politely ignoring the latter part of her speech. "One's grandfather is not generally lively company."

"Perhaps not ; but then I'm used to dullness. My life in London would hardly be called an exciting one."

"You live in London ?"

"Yes ; I have a house—my sister-in-law and I, I mean, have a house at Chelsea. My studio is there."

"May I——" Hyde was beginning, when Miss Prettyman and Halliday appeared round a corner, and he was obliged reluctantly to rise from his seat.

"Have you anything to sit on, Muriel ?" exclaimed the former. "If not, do let Mr. Halliday spread this waterproof under

you. I am certain those leaves are dreadfully damp."

"Indeed, no ; they are quite dry," Muriel answered, submitting, however, at the same time to have the cloak arranged for her by Halliday. This done he stood looking silently down on her, as she plied her brush. "You don't paint at all yourself, I think, do you, Mr. Halliday ?" she said at last, finding this silent inspection become monotonous.

"I ? Oh no."

Something in the tone provoked her into adding, "You wouldn't, perhaps, in any case ? you consider it a waste of time ?"

"Not at all," he answered eagerly ; "on the contrary, I think it an excellent—I mean a delightful—amusement."

"There speaks the genuine Philistine !" Hyde exclaimed. "Art, the mistress and idol of all the greatest minds for the last two thousand years, is an excellent amuse-

ment, a very nice resource for a wet afternoon, or for when a man has got a cold and can't go out!"

Muriel, however, was disposed to take the matter more seriously. "Do you mean to say really that you cannot imagine a man giving up his whole life to painting?" she said, laying down her brush for an instant, and turning to look incredulously at Halliday.

"His whole life? No; do you know, I don't know that I could imagine that," he answered seriously. "It does sound to me rather frivolous—rather, as you said, a waste of time."

"Frivolous? A waste of time? When he earns his living by it?" exclaimed Miss Prettyman, whose eyes had been opening wider and wider as she listened to these horrible doctrines. "Why, I know people—gentlemen, I mean—who began by being quite, quite poor, and are now rich men,

earning large incomes, and all from painting."

"But that doesn't prove that it is not frivolous, does it?" he answered.

"How can a thing be frivolous when you earn your living by it?" Miss Prettyman inquired with natural severity.

"Well, dress-making and millinery, I should call those frivolous occupations—for a man, I mean—though I believe there are people who make a good deal of money out of them."

"Dress-making? Oh, yes; but painting is not like that, not in the least; painting is so beautiful, so grand, so——" The poor little artist stopped short, overcome by her own emotions.

"You won't make him think any the better of it for that, Miss Prettyman," Hyde said, shaking his head. "If there is one thing your thorough-paced reformer hates more than another, it is beauty—

beautiful things at least. Every one can't have them, bless you, so why should any one? That's the doctrine, ain't it, Halliday?"

To this Halliday, however, vouchsafed no rejoinder.

"Now, my idea," Hyde continued, leaning back, and eyeing some small three-cornered scraps of sky which were just visible through the mass of foliage, "my own idea is that one oughtn't to tie oneself down for life to anything. Sip the sweets, and cull the flowers, as the old poets have it; that's the wise thing, depend upon it. Who is it calls life, 'A flux of moods'? Whoever he is, he seems to me to have hit upon about as neat a definition as could well be packed into a compass of four words."

"And how about the people who can't afford to dance attendance on their moods?" inquired his friend.

"Well, I'm very sorry for them, but what then? I don't see that spoiling my life and thwarting my moods is likely to help them to gratify theirs. Always supposing, of course, that mine are tolerably innocent ones. Not inclining in the direction of my neighbour's purse, or any other of his chattels."

"Oh, but I don't at all agree with you there," Muriel exclaimed eagerly. "I like your theories less even than Mr. Halliday's. I shouldn't like at all to feel that I lived in a sort of private Elysium of my own, out of which other people were shut. What right have I to claim any exemptions?"

"No right exactly, perhaps; but still you surely wouldn't object to them if you came by them honestly, would you?" Hyde inquired in a tone of surprise.

"Indeed I should, I should object very much. I like to feel that I am one of the

many—that I am only sharing the common lot.”

Hyde shrugged his shoulders. “Apparently you and Halliday are less apart than one might superficially suppose,” he said drily. “I shall have to fall back upon Miss Prettyman, who, I am sure, will be of my way of thinking. You don’t think we’re all bound to eat tripe, and travel third class, because there are people in the world who can’t afford to do otherwise, do you?” he added, addressing Elizabeth.

“Travel third class! Good gracious, no! You’re not surely thinking of going back to London third class, I hope, are you, Muriel?” she exclaimed with dismay.

Hyde laughed. “I beg your pardon; that was only meant as an illustration,” he said. “What I mean is that it seems to me nothing short of sheer perversity people refusing to enjoy the things they do enjoy merely because other people, who

probably wouldn't care two straws about them, can't have them. Halliday's grudge against pictures is that he looks upon them as a sort of upper class luxury, like truffles or champagne, and like other radicals, he objects to the existence of truffles upon principle."

Elizabeth's face expressed a mixture of perplexity and dismay. "Are you really a radical, Mr. Halliday?" she inquired solemnly.

"I don't call myself one, Miss Prettyman," he answered, smiling a little at her consternation; "but Hyde there, you see, does it for me."

"Don't you believe him, Miss Prettyman," that gentleman exclaimed. "A radical? of course he is; one of the worst and most virulent of the whole brood. He and such as he go cockering up the working classes until they are as inflated as so many air-bladders, and some of these

days, mark my words, their pets will astonish them. Then we shall have a fine to-do ; a nice noise and screaming—only that it will be a trifle too late. *Apropos* of noise," he added, throwing his head back with a sudden change of tone, "I wonder what upon earth all that noise can be up there upon the top of those sycamore trees. I have been listening to it for the last ten minutes, while we have been disputing. It is more like the mew-ing of kittens than anything else, but I never heard of people keeping their kittens on the tops of sycamore trees!"

"I know what they are ; they are jack-daws," Muriel said, not sorry, too, to hail a change of subject. "Those are the young birds we hear. Mr. Partridge showed me just such another nest close to his own house."

"Partridge ? Is he the husband of that acidulated looking landlady of yours ?"

"Yes; he is a great naturalist—really a very great one, and he has been teaching me to distinguish the different birds and insects apart. I feel quite ashamed to think how little I knew about them before I came here; in fact, I believe I rather looked down upon the whole subject. I suppose it is like art," she added, with a glance in Halliday's direction, "no one can hope to appreciate it who doesn't approach in the proper spirit."

"Well, I confess my sympathies are more with the painters than the bug stickers," Hyde said nonchalantly. "The others seem to me about the biggest monomaniacs going. Last spring, for instance, I met a friend of mine at Cairo—a man called Brodigan—a capital good sort of fellow, but as mad as a hatter about bugs. It was getting pretty hot, and every one else was hurrying away, but he had only just come. 'Good heavens, Brodigan,


what brings you here so late?' said I. 'Oh, I'm not staying; I'm only passing through to Nubia,' said he. 'To Nubia, at this time of year?' 'Yes, to collect the spring beetles. I don't want to miss the right month.' Evidently he considered it the most natural thing in the world for a man to come out from England to Africa to collect spring beetles, so I simply turned on my heel and left him, and as I have not seen him since, he is probably in Nubia still."

Muriel laughed. "That certainly is rather an extreme case," she said. "Still I think your friend was right in the main. It seems a stupid thing to go out of the world knowing little more about its other inhabitants than when one came in."

She had finished her sketch now; so, having collected her painting materials, she got up, and they strolled leisurely

back together to the encampment. Here, after a little more dawdling about, the plates and knives and forks were all packed into the hamper, and they set off on their return march; Hyde and Muriel this time leading; Miss Prettyman and Halliday bringing up the rear.

After the pony was harnessed, and the two ladies had taken their places, Hyde continued talking, with his foot upon the step of the carriage, Halliday meanwhile keeping somewhat aloof. All the way home Elizabeth's tongue ran glibly upon the former's perfections. He was so agreeable, and clever, and attentive; he knew so much about art; to all which Muriel cordially assented. Oddly enough, however, her own thoughts ran chiefly upon the other man, who was not particularly agreeable or attentive, and who certainly knew nothing whatsoever about art. Once she mentioned his name to



her companion, but Elizabeth, while still acknowledging the obligation they owed in the matter of the tramps, could hardly restrain her horror and indignation at the sentiments to which he had given utterance that afternoon. A clergyman too! it was really shocking. Somebody, she declared, ought to write to the bishop about it. Just conceive the harm which a man in such a position might do, going about the country with such horribly radical notions! Muriel, if not quite as much shocked as regards the radicalism, was, at all events, quite in agreement with her as to the heinousness of Halliday's theories on the subject of art. It seemed extraordinary to her indeed that any one who was evidently a gentleman, and who had presumably received the advantages of one, should have remained in such an utterly dark and benighted condition. All this, however, only caused her perhaps to

think of him the more. She would rather like, she thought, to have had another discussion with him upon the subject, sundry excellent arguments having—as usually happens in controversies—occurred to her after the occasion for using them was over. There was no use in thinking of that, however, she felt; their meeting at all, after all, had been only due to an accident, and one that was not in the least likely to repeat itself.

As a matter of fact, however, they did meet again, and that too in the most natural way in the world, Muriel having driven over to the village to keep her promise with her friend of the cottage, and to taste the turnovers. She was alone, Elizabeth being busy preparing for the start which was to take place the following day. Walking back to where she had left the pony carriage, she encountered Halliday coming out of his lodgings, and they

walked down to the end of the village together.

"You have never seen the font, I think, Miss Ellis," he said, as they were passing the church. "As you know, I am a Goth in such matters, but people tell me the carving is worth looking at. Will you come and try?"

Muriel assented, and they turned up the narrow path together.

After inspecting the font, they walked round to look at the windows, and then, coming out, followed the other footpath, which led to the paling over which Muriel had scrambled on her first adventurous expedition. The grass had grown rank and coarse in the weeks that had passed since then; the trees, too, had lost their first fresh tints, and showed a wide uniformity of green; the little graves, however, were still bright with buttercups and daisies, a few evil-faced hemlocks here

and there showing amongst the humbler growths. Muriel stood with her hand on the railing, looking over into the forest. Close to where they were standing a couple of brown-breasted linnets were busy amongst the seed vessels of an elm; and from time to time a wood-pigeon crossed overhead, its passage marked in rapidly dissolving spots of shadow upon the grass.

"I am so sorry to think that this is my last day here," she said, turning to her companion.

"You go home to-morrow?"

"Yes, to London."

"I shall be going there soon, too," Halliday said. "Mr. Bellenden, the rector, is returning at last."

"Ah, I remember. I had almost forgotten you were only here temporarily. You will be sorry to leave, I dare say?" she added inquiringly.

"To a certain extent, yes. One can't help liking the place. Still it is a stagnant, do-nothing sort of life for a man to lead. Not that I am likely to do very much better elsewhere," he added bitterly.

Muriel was a little startled. It had struck her before that something was amiss with this broad-shouldered companion of hers, but her previous observations had not prepared her for anything so tragic as all this. What was it? she wondered. Certainly he looked unhappy, more so she fancied now than when she saw him last.

"But, Mr. Halliday, why do you talk of yourself as if you were useless?" she said gently. "You seem to me to do so much, and Mr. Hyde told me you were always working for other people. In fact, he seemed to think you did rather too much than too little."

"Hyde talks nonsense," he said curtly.

"Then every one talks nonsense; old Mrs. Smith, for instance. She has been entertaining me for the last half-hour with a chronicle of your good deeds. And in London, too, you will be able to do so much," she added expostulatively.

"That is just it," he said despondently. "I don't see my way to doing anything there. Here it is different. Any one can make a splash in such a puddle as this; but when I think of going back, it seems like—I don't know what—trying to dig tunnels with toothpicks!"

"You mean on account of the numbers?"

"Yes, that and—other things."

Muriel was silent a minute. "I don't know; I don't like to give an opinion, I am so ignorant," she said doubtfully; "still it seems to me that if a man is determined to be of use—really and truly determined, as you seem to be—he

ought not to fail. There must always be such an immensity to do. And then you are not likely to fail from disgust. You are not—at least, I should fancy you are not—fastidious.”

“No, I am not that certainly. Still there are other ways of failing—other ways of a man becoming useless besides that.”

“What sort of ways?”

He turned and looked at her with a sort of sudden exasperation. A little heap of leaves, which had been raked together on the path, were being scattered by the breeze around her feet; shadows from the leafy canopy overhead were falling in rippling succession over her hair, over her neck, over her eager upturned face. Her hat had fallen a little back; in the transparent shadow her eyes looked larger and darker than usual.

“Plenty,” he said shortly. “More than

I could explain, or you could understand."

"You must think me singularly stupid, then."

"I don't think you stupid at all."

"Frivolous, then?"

"No, nor that either. The fact is, I can't explain; difficulties come in a man's way—all sorts of difficulties. I have no sort of right or excuse for troubling you about them, so what's the use of talking at all?"

Muriel looked puzzled. "Do you mean as to—as to doctrines?" she said doubtfully.

"Doctrines? Oh no," he answered; "nothing of that sort. It is simply myself—my own stupidity. I thought I saw my way to doing things, and now I don't; that's all. I fancied I was particularly strong, and instead of that I turn out, as it happens, to be ridiculously, preposterously

weak. "I don't suppose I am the first man that has made that discovery," he added, the same bitter inflection coming again into his voice.

Muriel was silent. Certainly it did not seem to her as if she or any one else could be of very much assistance in such a vaguely-expressed and mysterious sort of trouble as this. It began to strike her, too, that for such a very recent acquaintanceship, the conversation during the last five minutes had taken a decidedly personal turn. Accordingly she turned away from the paling, and led the way back along the daisy-margined path to the village.

After the silence of the churchyard, that little community appeared quite festive and astir. Old Mrs. Pottles, the pew-opener, was bobbing and courtesying at her door; cocks and hens were cackling and pecketting about in the gravel; a long squad of geese came waddling one after

the other across the road ; the red roofs and low brown eaves looked homely and friendly in the sunshine.

" I wonder whether I shall ever find myself here again ? " Muriel said, looking vaguely round her.

" Why not ? "

" No reason at all. In fact, I rather plan returning to the New Forest next year. Only, when one has enjoyed being in a place, one always has that feeling when one is leaving it. Don't you think so ? "

" I shall not be here again, at any rate," he said positively.

" Shall you not ? Perhaps, then, we may meet in London ? "

He shook his head. " Where do you live ? What part ? " he inquired abruptly.

" In Chelsea. My sister-in-law and I have a house there."

" And I in Whitechapel—dozens of miles

away. So, you see, our chance of meeting is small."

Muriel's thoughts flew to the river—that link between east and west. She did not choose, however, to point to a mode of communication which had apparently escaped him.

"Mr. Hyde has left you, I suppose?" she said instead.

"Yes, more than a week ago."

"I dare say I may meet him in London."

"I dare say you will."

After this no further observations were exchanged until they had nearly reached the pony-carriage. Just as they were doing so, a heavy shower suddenly burst over them, the big drops pattering down over the silent forest.

"You will get desperately wet, I am afraid," Halliday exclaimed. "Hadn't you better come back to my lodgings until it is over?"

"Oh no, thank you, Mr. Halliday. I am sure it will not be much. Besides, I have an umbrella."

"How can you hold it up and drive too?"

"Then the boy shall hold it up over us both."

"Indeed, you would be wiser to come back," he said. "What is the sense of getting wet? Do let me persuade you."

"Indeed no; I really must be getting back," she answered. "Miss Prettyman will be expecting me."

"But she wouldn't wish you to get a bad cold, would she?" Halliday exclaimed, in a tone of heightened remonstrance—the tone which a man instinctively assumes when he feels that a woman is persisting in some line of conduct in defiance at once of himself and of common sense.

Miss Ellis drew herself up. "Thank

you, but really I am in the habit of judging for myself," she replied coldly, at the same time mounting into the carriage, and beginning to arrange her skirts. Just as she was about to drive away, however, she relented. "Good-bye, Mr. Halliday," she said, holding out her hand. "I hope, after all, we may meet again in London or—somewhere."

"Good-bye," he answered gravely, without, however, echoing her wish.

Then she whipped up the pony, and drove hastily away through the rain. The next day she and Elizabeth Prettyman departed for Chelsea.

END OF VOL. I.



